GOD OF JUSTICE

Ritual Healing and Social Justice in the Central Himalayas



William S. Sax

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WILLIAM S. SAX

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This book is dedicated to Sarah Lakshmi,
in the hope that she will help create a more just world.

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Firesong

Wander, my Siddha, through all the high mountains.
The fire of Shiva the renouncer is burning.
A fire of cow-dung, a fire of sandalwood.
I give reverence to your mother's brother, Shiva,
With the incense burner in one of my hands,
And the ringing conch shell in the other.
I lift and I ring the cow-shaped bell.
I offer him barley, I offer him sesame.
I offer him songs of praise!

The first ash is offered to Shiva on Kailash.
The next ash is placed on your own forehead.
The next ash is offered to the Huraki-drum.
The next ash is given to the seat of the guru.
The next ash is offered to the worshiper's family.
The next ash you give to the wide, wide world.
May you bloom with success, my wandering Yogi!

—Recorded by Satyeshwar Himalaya (Sacchu)
in Nauti, Spring 2003 (Appendix, Text 1).

1

Introduction

Fieldwork among the Harijans

Beginnings

When I first began exploring the Central Himalayas in 1977, I saw many tiny shrines dotting the countryside. They were small structures, rarely more than a meter high, sometimes made of cement but more often of stone and mud. In front of them were fire-tongs, tridents, cloth bags, and sometimes a staff of timaru wood.[1] I saw them, but I did not really notice them; that is, I never thought much about them, nor did I ask for which gods they had been made. They were small, poor shrines, neither grand and impressive like the famous temples at Badrinath and Kedarnath, nor artistically sophisticated like the nearby shrines of Adi-Badri.

They were built close to the earth, and the people who built them were also of the earth: neither powerful nor wealthy, but rather small people, humble people. And the gods for whom these shrines were made were not the great gods of Hinduism, not Shiva and Parvati, nor Vishnu and Lakshmi, but just *devtas*, minor local godlings closely associated with the hills and ravines, the cliffs and streams, of Chamoli District. Most the shrines were associated with a *devta* called Bhairav,[2] and at first, I thought that I knew who he was—after all, Bhairava is well-known in the scriptures of South Asia (see chapter 2). But I was wrong—the Bhairav for whom all these shrines were made is similar to the Bhairava of the Sanskrit scriptures, but they are not identical. The Bhairava of the scriptures has long fangs

and glossy, blue-black skin, while Bhairav of Garhwal is a yogi who wears a loincloth and carries fire-tongs, a wooden staff, a trident, and an orange cloth bag. His ears are split and he wears rings in them, like the Kanphata yogis of the Nath tradition.[3] His stories are not written in Sanskrit, but rather sung by low-caste healers, who are summoned when their clients are afflicted. The healers remove these afflictions by singing Bhairav's songs and performing his rituals, which often involve bloody sacrifice and dramatic possession. In the end, I realized that in order to understand this local Bhairav, I had to set aside what I thought I knew, and listen instead to what local people said about him, and to the songs they sang about him.

In this book, I have written about what I learned, and I have done so as an advocate and exponent of ethnography, which I take to be the heart and soul of ethnology.[4] For most ethnographers, it is axiomatic that by living with a particular group of people, adopting their diet and dress, speaking their language and participating in their way of life, one achieves a kind understanding that cannot be replicated by conducting surveys, reading novels, watching movies, measuring land holdings or calorie intake or cranial size, studying history, analyzing language, conducting experiments, or any of the other methods employed by the human sciences. Certainly these other methods are worthwhile, but most ethnographers are committed to the idea that participant observation (which I will henceforth refer to loosely as "ethnographic research" or even incorrectly as "ethnography") has something special to contribute to the understanding of particular cultures, and thereby of human beings generally. In recent years, however, many influential voices outside ethnology—and not a few within it—have urged that ethnography should be abandoned, modified, or made less central to the discipline. Two such critiques, both of them originating in literary circles, have been especially influential in recent years: one of them postmodern and epistemological, the other postcolonial and moral.

The Epistemological Critique of Fieldwork

Derrida once observed that "there is nothing outside the text," and this corresponds in a rough sort of way to the epistemological critique of fieldwork. According to this critique, we can never produce an adequate or "objective" description of social phenomena, because our descriptions and analyses are inevitably couched in language, so that we can never apprehend such phenomena directly, in a way that is unmediated by language. As Rorty has pointed out, Derrida's observation was nothing more than a "lighthearted extravagance" (1982: 154), but nevertheless a surprising number of intellectuals have

taken it literally, arguing that any attempt to privilege some specific reading as more "accurate" or "objective" is nothing but an expression or a mystification of power.[5] Through sheer intellectual force, thinkers like Foucault and Derrida engendered widespread skepticism about whether we can ever achieve a reasonably accurate, empirical, or "objective" view of the world.

The edited volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford 1986) applied these ideas to ethnographic writing, and it became one of the most influential books in ethnology during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Clifford and his coauthors persuasively argued that when we analyze ethnographies as literary texts, we can see how ethnographic authority is constituted through a number of rhetorical devices. Chief among these is ethnographic realism, which has been (and remains) the dominant style within the discipline. Ethnographic realism attempts to give the impression of a balanced, objective, and rather clinical description of social reality: nothing but the facts, Ma'am. But for the postmodern critic, such writing achieves nothing more than a pseudo-objectivity, and it does this not so much by providing an account that is isomorphic to "the facts," but rather through specific literary and rhetorical devices, many of which tend to conceal the actual relations of production of the text itself.

For example, most ethnographies are collaborative efforts, in which the ethnographer's understanding of indigenous ideas and social forms has been achieved by means of a long and thoroughly dialectical series of intellectual and social exchanges with the natives: a wonderful example, in fact, of Gadamer's model of the extended conversation.[6] And yet these ethnographies have usually been presented as the work of a single person—the ethnographer—whose name is the only one to appear on the title page. This is a rather straightforward example of the way in which traditional ethnographies obscure their own relations of production, and the solution to the problem is equally straightforward: to identify the chief collaborators and make their roles apparent in the text, as I have tried to do in this book. I have also attempted to be more honest than is usually the case about the conditions of fieldwork, the way in which I gathered my data, and so on. Such "reflexive" ethnography is no doubt more personal than older styles of ethnographic writing, which left the ethnographer out of the narrative. But to abandon the older style of (pseudo-) objective ethnographic writing is not to reject the idea that there is a real social world that can be more or less accurately described; it is only to acknowledge that the ethnographer's observations and analysis are partial and limited, and to enhance the adequacy of his representation by being truthful about how it was produced.

The postmodern critique spawned some interesting and imaginative experiments in ethnographic writing. Some succeeded, most failed, but all illustrate

a new self-consciousness regarding the processes of production of ethnological knowledge and how these processes impinge on ethnographic writing. It is important to view this new awareness, not as signaling an admission that "there is nothing outside the text," but rather as reaffirming the ethnological commitment to empirical (and usually extratextual) research. The value of reflexive ethnography lies precisely in the fact that it better informs the reader of the author's prejudices and predispositions, and of the ways in which the data were gathered and the text constructed, thus enabling her to get closer to whatever reality is being described and analyzed. That is why I include descriptions of my personal experiences and feelings in my ethnographic accounts—not only to make a more entertaining story (though of course I hope to do that as well) but also to teach the reader something about how I conducted the research on which the ethnography is based. I describe the collaborative nature of this research, not only to give credit to my associates in India (although it is certainly important to do so) but also in order to provide my readers with a clearer idea of how the text was produced. Reflexivity in ethnographic writing is not just a literary technique. More importantly, it is a refinement of the ethnographic method that is justified on empirical grounds, because it more accurately represents the research process.

First Séance

I began the ethnographic research for this book after I had finished a project on *Pandav Lila*, a tradition of ritual performance of India's great epic *Mahabharata*, and was searching for my next research topic. I didn't know exactly what that topic would be—I only knew that I wanted to work on the religion of the lowest castes. In my doctoral research, I had concentrated on the cult of the goddess Nanda Devi, and done most of my research among the highest castes of Brahman priests (Sax 1991). In my subsequent research on *Pandav Lila* I had worked closely with the other regional high-caste group, the Kshatriyas, or Rajputs as they are locally known (Sax 2002). And now, in order to deepen my knowledge of local culture, I planned to work among the lowest castes, locally known as Harijans.[7] Of course, I was already familiar with them: as drummers and musicians, they were central to the cult of Nanda Devi as well as to *Pandav Lila* performances. I knew many Harijans: I had interviewed them, recorded and translated their songs, and visited them in their homes. But I had never done proper ethnographic research among them, never lived with them for long periods of time, never focused on their social life and customs, never asked them in detail about their lives. And now I thought that it was time to

do so. I especially wanted to concentrate on their religious practices, because I thought that by studying these, I could address an important issue in the ethnology of Hinduism: whether or not Harijan culture and religion is distinct from that of other Hindus.[8]

These were my general and rather vague ideas, but I did not know exactly how to pursue them. I only knew that certain low-caste men, the so-called gurus, functioned as priests in local religious practices that were very popular among the Harijans.[9] I was trying to find out more about these practices, but I wasn't having much success. I had taken a long bus trip to the village of one of the best-known local gurus, who had a rather dark reputation as a sorcerer (*sabari*), where I was told that he had gone to the fields. It was there that I found him, a hardy eighty-year-old man working alone, planting the spring crop. He was polite but reserved, first inviting me to accompany him during a ritual that he was going to perform a few days later, then rescinding the offer because it was a secret ritual. Perhaps a client had hired him to curse someone, and he didn't want to be seen engaging in such morally suspect activities (see chapter 7).

Then I went with my old friend and assistant Dabar Singh, with whom I was staying at the time, to the village of Mayapuri to see a Harijan woman who sometimes acted as an oracle.[10] Clients would come to her with their problems and she would go into trance. Speaking through her, the god would diagnose the causes of the illness or misfortune, and prescribe a remedy, normally a ritual of some kind. She and her husband told me that they needed to sponsor a lengthy ritual, but they didn't have enough money to go and summon the guru, so I gave them a hundred rupees (Rs. 100) for their travel costs, but when I came back several days later, they had done nothing.

Like other scientists, an ethnographer needs data, and I wasn't getting any. The invitation to see the secret ritual had been rescinded, the Harijan oracle had taken my money but done nothing, and several other leads had also failed to bring results. I was irritated, frustrated, and concerned about my lack of progress. But that very day as I left the Harijan oracle's village, I ran into a young man on the path. He called himself Satyeshvar Himalaya, but to the villagers he was just Sacchu, and in the following months and years he became my major informant and a good friend. He charmed and delighted me with his ready smile and quick laughter, his irreverent stories about high-caste people, and his tales of adventures around India. He claimed to have spent some fifteen years on and off in Bombay, and even to have done a bit of playback singing there. He seemed to understand my difficulty immediately, and told me that he and his father were gurus themselves, and that they could arrange for me to see one of the rituals in which I was so interested. He took me to the house of a man named Makkhan Lal, with whom I recorded the following interview (see figure 1.1):

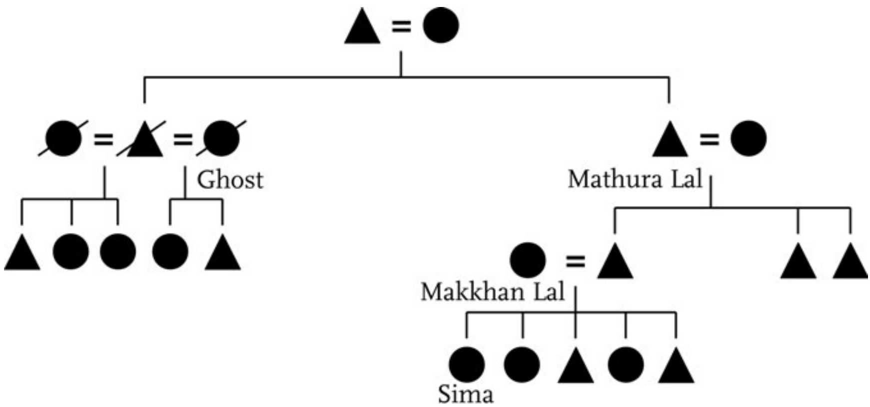


FIGURE 1.1. Sapna's family.

[My father] Mathura Lal was the youngest of two brothers. His elder brother died, leaving two widows and five children. Three children were the offspring of the older wife, and two were the offspring of the younger wife. After the elder wife died, the younger wife took good care of her own two children, but she didn't really look after the three children of her deceased elder co-wife. One day my father said to her that although she was looking after her own two children well, she was not looking after the three children of the first wife. She became furious, and called upon her god, saying, "God, my brother, you alone must look after me!" She must have gone to her natal home and laid a curse. And that's how this god got stuck to us. This happened fourteen years ago, but the god has only recently seized us. He comes over this girl here [gestures toward his daughter, Sapna]. After five minutes her stomach hurts and she collapses. But after a little while she's OK again.

Q: Did you consult an oracle?

A: At least a hundred times! I went to one oracle after another, but different answers emerged. When I took her to the hospital she had no pain, but when I brought her home she seemed as though she would die! So I would take her back to the hospital, and once again there was no pain. But as soon as we reached home, the stomach pains would begin again! We exhausted ourselves consulting oracles, until at last it emerged that it was the god from Mathiyala.[11]

I made a vow to the god.[12] I gave him Rs. 1.25 and some *pithaim* (coloured powder used to mark ritual objects), and said, "I will

> worship you if she is cured." And she got well for three months. The god gave us relief for three months. And in the month of Paush [December–January] I was ready to worship, but I had no money, so I couldn't do it. I did a *kas puja*[13] but nothing else. And I didn't worship in the month of Chaitra, either—there was no money! Then her pains began again, and they were so bad that I thought, "It would be better if she died!" I've just come today from taking her to the hospital in Karanprayag. I spoke to the goatherds [to buy a goat for the sacrifice], made all the preparations for the *puja* [ritual], got ready for it . . . I even split rocks along the road to make money to pay for the ritual, but I was unable to sell them. Finally I managed to perform the *kas puja* and the god appeared again, and we asked for relief. My wife said, "If it's really, truly you, God, then seize someone else!" And then Sapna's elder sister began to have pains in her foot.

Immediately after the interview, Sapna manifested her symptoms. She was about nine years old at the time, and seemed like a typically happy, carefree child. But suddenly she bent at the waist, put her head on her father's knee, and began crying and sobbing for several minutes. "Look, sahib," said her parents, "how can we cure this?"

Makkhan Lal said that if only I would give him Rs. 3000 (about $60), he would be able to purchase the sacrificial animals, pay the guru's fee, take care of all the guests that he would be obliged to invite, and cure his daughter's illness. But I was reluctant to give him the money. First of all, there was the matter of professional ethics: I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible, and to record only those rituals that were "naturally" performed. Certainly, I did not want to start paying for them! On the other hand, Makkhan Lal was clearly desperate to have the *puja* done—and I was rather desperate to see one! Three thousand rupees was nothing to me, no more than the cost of a good meal in a restaurant with my family back home. How could I deny this to him? And then there was the matter of my local reputation: if word got round that I was being exploited by the Harijans, or even worse, that they had made a fool of me by taking my money and not performing the ritual, then I would be a laughingstock. Since I didn't know what to do, I played for time, and told Makkhan Lal that I first had to confer with my assistant Dabar Singh. Makkhan Lal's father Mathura Lal must have understood my doubts, because he accompanied me on the bus back to Dabar Singh's village, and along the way he kept promising that he would do the puja. Over and over, he said, "I'm speaking from my mouth, not my asshole! No one eats shit from my mouth!" That evening, Dabar Singh warned me to be careful. "These Harijans are masters at gaining your

sympathy," he said. "They'll break your heart and bring tears to your eyes, and in the end you'll have nothing but an empty pocket." I told him that I had my doubts in any case, and thought that perhaps it was nothing more than a little girl's game, that Sapna was only pretending to be sick because she enjoyed the attention. He looked at me darkly, and said that I should never, *ever* doubt the power of the god. "Be careful," he said. "That *devta* causes even the healthy and powerful to fall!"

Next day it was terribly cold, with freezing rain and treacherous, muddy paths. On the way down to Makkhan Lal's village I slipped and badly sprained my ankle. I gave him half the amount he had requested—Rs. 1500—so that he could purchase a male goat and two small sheep. "But there is one condition," I said. "You must promise to do the ritual just as you normally would. Don't change anything on my account. And if you don't do the puja after I've given you all this money, then you will have to answer to your *devta*!" Makkhan Lal spent the whole day clambering up and down the mountains in the freezing rain, negotiated a price for the animals, and brought them home. But they were in miserable shape, and I wondered if they would survive the night. It grew dark; I missed the bus and limped back to Dabar Singh's village on my painfully swollen ankle. Next morning it was pouring rain, my ankle was hurting very badly, and I developed a case of diarrhea. I lay in bed and asked myself why I ever left my comfortable home and family to come to these cold mountains for fieldwork. I wanted nothing more than to remain in Dabar Singh's house under my comfortable quilt, but nevertheless I made my way to Mayapuri, only to discover that the large goat, the main sacrificial animal, had died during the night. Of course I had to pay for another.

Makkhan Lal had already visited several oracles, who had told him that in order to cure Sapna of her affliction he had to erect a shrine, or *than*,[14] in his house. Most of the ritual activity took place in a tiny room barely fifteen feet square. Over the course of the afternoon this room slowly filled until there were perhaps thirty people, sitting knee to knee. But I was not used to such cramped conditions, and every few minutes I had to shift my position to take the pressure off my knees, which was very difficult since we were packed so closely together. Finally it was time to begin. Sacchu's friend Dinesh brought two wooden sticks whose tips had been hardened in the fire, inverted a steel platter (*thali*), and began warming up, playing the *thali* like a cymbal—rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat! rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat! Sacchu tuned his Huraki drum by adjusting its leather straps, and a third man took his place next to them, to sing the part of the *bhamvar*, or "drone."[15] The music started, and the gods began to dance.

I was utterly bewildered by the number of gods who came, possessed their human "beasts," and danced. Even Sacchu the guru was occasionally puzzled,

as several gods would often dance at the same time, and he would have to quickly recognize the god and change his song accordingly. The gods' language was difficult to understand, full of shrieks and hesitations, as if they found it difficult to speak. But oh, how the guru's music was made for dancing! Sacchu may or may not have been a playback singer in Bombay, but he had a superb voice that immediately captured everyone's attention, while his friend Dinesh played an irresistable rhythm on the *thali*. On the first night, in the middle of the seance, Makkhan Lal's wife suddenly cried out from the back room. Sacchu stopped playing his drum and called out in a slightly panicked voice, "Is it a ghost? Is it a ghost?" And indeed it was: the ghost of the woman who had placed the curse. They carried her out into the tiny room and Mathura Lal began to protest his innocence: "What did we do to deserve this? I only said that you didn't feed those children properly, and you went straight to lay a curse on me!" Sacchu sang on:

> Hey ghost, become godlike!
> You come to the guru's rhythm.
> You hear it and you come.
> You've come to our happy ritual of celebration.
> This celebration is for you.
> The master of this house is making you his support.
> He's making you his goddess!

Sacchu stops playing and says, "Why are you crying? We're making a new place for you, we are worshiping you! What else do you want?" Then he sings a song of praise to Bhairav, for whom the ritual is being performed, asking him to give milk to the livestock and intelligence to the family, to bless his client who is sponsoring this ritual, to be the mother and the father of the orphans, the support of the poor, to be a tree in which little birds can rest. Bhairav possesses Makkhan Lal, who cries out as if in pain. He moves his jaw but no sound comes out; this indicates that the god is trying to speak, but cannot. Makkhan Lal's wife (Sapna's mother) loses consciousness, and it is clear to everyone that there is a problem: the ghost will not allow Bhairav to take up residence in his new shrine. They put oil on her forehead and give her milk to drink, and she regains consciousness. Within minutes, more gods arrive and there is more possession, more dancing, further exchanges with the god that I do not understand. My head is spinning from the drama of the ritual, from the difficulty of comprehending what is happening. Villagers kneel before the gods possessing their human "beasts," asking them the reasons for their illnesses and misfortunes. A young girl suffers from headaches, a retired soldier wants to know who has tipped his new taxi into the ravine, the guru himself asks why he still

has no son. So many problems, illness and misfortune, missing children, barren livestock, financial ruin, earnest faces, beseeching gestures—a world full of affliction and pain.

Sacchu explains that the ghost and the god are "joined" and must be separated before the god can manifest himself. It is very late and we stop so that everyone can catch a few hours' sleep before the sun rises. Late next afternoon, Sacchu's father, Darpal, comes to perform the ghost puja. Soon the gods begin to dance, and the ghost comes over Makkhan Lal's wife, who begins screaming very loudly in the back room. The sound is frightening and my hair stands on end—it sounds as if a soul is howling from the depths of hell. Then the guru begins to sing:

> That sinful god of death took you away while you were still alive.
> He put you in death's net, he put you in the noose.
> Come here, oh ghost! Come here, oh ghost!
> Your curse has come true.
> Come here, oh ghost! from the house of death.
> Come here, oh ghost! from the land to the west.
> Come here, oh ghost! you've come via the oracle.
> Come here, oh ghost! from the canyons and ravines.
> Oh ghost, you had no one when you died.

Mathura Lal calls out, "Listen! The children of whom I spoke were your descendents as well as mine! Give up your curse! Take a divine body!" There is more music, dancing, prophesying. Bhairav possesses Sapna's mother, and s/he plucks at her hair, indicating that when the woman laid the curse she tore out a lock of hair and left it at the god's shrine. Bhairav says his shrine should be built in the fields of Kundi Lal (who has refused to attend this ritual), a descendant of the ghost. The guru says, "Kundi Lal will be angry, but Bhairav insists: it must be built in that field!" There is more possession, music, drumming, dancing, more conversation with the gods, more oracular consultations.

And then, suddenly, the evening's performance is over. Everyone seems content. The men light cheroots, and Darpal tells a story:

> In one place I played music for six days, but still the god didn't come. A man had vowed that Mathiyala Bhairav wouldn't dance there, and then he died. It took a lot of effort to get the god to dance. Someone said to me, "You can't do it—you can't make the god dance!" But I answered, "Just wait and see; if he doesn't dance tonight, then I'll leave tomorrow!" Another guru had come there—he called everyone inside, put a torn workbasket on the ground,[16] and whistled. I took

> my ritual seat and said, “Well, let’s see if the god comes now,” but nothing happened. Then I uttered some mantras into a pouchful of rice, which I kept behind my back. At two o’clock in the morning I summoned up a cremation ground. The client said, “No one is able to make this god dance!” but I replied, “I’ve sung every song but one. I’ll sing it, and then we’ll see what happens!” So I played the circle-dance song and I whistled, and a *devta* cried out on the pass! Voices called out from the cremation ground! And then all the Harijan “beasts” from Kyunja and Khal and Lamdhar came there, with blood-curdling cries! They all came and made a “cremation ground.” A hundred people were gathered for that ritual, and after the *devtas* had come and made up the cremation ground, there must have been six or seven hundred of us altogether! Some of the people there got angry with me—they said, “What kind of guru are you, to summon up a cremation ground with all of these demons?” I admitted that I had called them, and that if anyone was harmed it would be my responsibility. . . . Then I took the pouch of rice from behind my back and showed it to the *devtas*, and they stayed under my control. When one of them got a bit wild, I put his head on the ground and stood on his hair, and said, “We are letting you dance and we are feeding you! We’ve spoken only sweet words to you, no insults! So dance properly, or get out!” I kept trying to pacify him, told him to be peaceful, but he wouldn’t obey me. So I trampled on his head! When an animal keeps trying to butt you, then you finally have to kick it!

Next day they performed the ghost puja in the afternoon. Makkhan Lal lit an oil lamp and some incense, and prepared the other ritual materials. Darpal did not bring his Huraki drum, but instead played the inverted metal platter or *thali*, without accompaniment. He recited a long mantra, and then began to play the *thali* while singing:

> Awaken, oh ghost! Your lamp is lit.
> Awaken, oh ghost! We have lit the incense.
> Awaken, oh ghost! For the head of the family.
> Awaken, oh ghost! Who dwells far away.
> Awaken, oh ghost! In the land of death.
> Awaken, oh ghost! In the children’s square.
> Awaken, oh ghost! In this village of ours.
> Come, oh ghost! For your children and grandchildren.
> Come, oh ghost! For the orphans.
> Come, oh ghost! For the abandoned children.

Come, oh ghost! For the offspring of your womb.
Your curse came true in the land of death.
That sinful Yama[17] took you while you were still alive.
Come, oh ghost! Yama caught you in his net;
  time caught you in her noose.
Come, oh ghost! That sinful Yama took all your tears,
  took all your eyes.
Come, oh ghost! From the land of death.

(At this point the ghost possesses a woman, who begins to scream and wail, and the guru shouts out, "Light the incense!")

Come, oh ghost! From the house of Kalangiri.
Come, oh ghost! The morning sun has set in the West.
Come, oh ghost! Night has fallen, the air is cool.

They put a bunch of grass on the "ghost's" head and cut it with a sickle, to free the ghost from the net of death so that she can take a divine form (see chapter 6). They feed milk to her, and put milk and oil on her head. Often in such cases the ghost asks about his or her old friends, children, relatives, and other loved ones. This time, however, there is little conversation: the ghost dances awhile, embraces Sapna, the afflicted girl, whose head she puts on her lap, and then departs (i.e., possessed the woman falls unconscious).

The main puja for Mathiyala Bhairav was completed without further delay. When the *devta* next possessed Makkhan Lal, he was smiling and happy. Everyone seemed content and satisfied, and the guru sang of all the things they would offer to the deity. Subsequenly, the *devta* revealed that he had originally intended to destroy the whole family, including the children, because Kundi Lal had refused to come. Mathura Lal, whose casual remark to his elder sister-in-law had caused the whole affair, said he only wanted to protect the children, that he didn't do anything wrong, and the god replied that this was why he only gave a slight illness, and not too much trouble.

Later that night Dabar Singh and I find ourselves standing in a field at 4 a.m., in the freezing cold. Makkhan Lal has not made the shrine properly, and the guru must repair it. It is bitterly cold, and my hands are freezing—even more so because I have been assigned the task of bringing a bucket of water for cleaning the guts of the sacrificed goat. The mood is one of furtive secrecy. There is no dramatic conclusion. They have invited Dabar Singh and me to stay overnight, but he cannot bear the thought of staying with the Harijans, and so we walk back to his home, arriving at dawn.

This fieldwork is turning out to be rather psychologically demanding. This is partly because the rituals are so exciting and dramatic: the drumming and

singing, the ecstatic dancing of possessed people, the awesome appearance of the fearsome deities, the ghosts from the past, wailing and shrieking in a stuffy, crowded room. And all of this together with the poverty and suffering of the Harijans—it makes such a contrast to my own relative wealth and power. At the very beginning of my fieldwork, in April 1998, I had written this entry in my diary:

> I think it's finally happened: I've found a research topic that is too intense for me . . . rituals to awaken the dead, performed secretly in the middle of the night at the cremation ground; deities that feed on corpses and filth; long-forgotten curses that cause even the wealthy and powerful to sicken and die; magical herbs and poisons slipped secretly into an enemy's food; violent sacrifices at midnight, the blood of the writhing animal dripped slowly into a red earthen pot filled with thorns, centipedes, worms, and other low and slinking creatures . . .
>
> For weeks I have been trekking from village to village, meeting with exorcists and magicians, transcribing old manuscripts with secret spells, and participating in these fearsome rituals. The people are so poor, their houses tiny and dirty; they haven't enough to eat; they are beset on all sides by poverty, violence, and disease; their only powerful friends are the fierce beings who inhabit these cold, threatening mountains. They call on these deities to curse their enemies, but there is a price to pay: the worshiper must establish a shrine of the god in his own home, and his descendants must continue to worship him forever.
>
> And so they call the Harijan guru, who comes with his Huraki drum. At midnight the villagers gather, they light a lamp, and the guru calls the spirits down from the high Himalaya, up from the cremation ground. He sings and chants all night, summoning the gods, who possess the villagers one by one. They shout from enthusiasm, agony, or both, then "dance" on the earthen floor on all fours, some barking like dogs, others roaring like lions, the women's long hair unbound, whipping back and forth as they dance in wild abandon. Sometimes the ghosts of the unhappy dead come: they wail and moan, and seek to learn the reason for their unending torment. What is my role here, what is my purpose, my responsibility? To record these people's poverty? To subject their suffering to a "scientific" analysis? To display it to my students and readers? How can I ever help these unfortunate, suffering people?

At the beginning of the research, I began to experience vague feelings of supernatural threat. For example, when I returned to Dabar Singh's house just before Makkhan Lal's ritual, he warned me that the god Kachiya was very dangerous. Looking directly at me, he had said, "Kachiya causes even the healthy and powerful to fall!" And it was the very next day thatI slipped in the mud and sprained my ankle. I sprained it so badly that it was months until I was able to walk without the aid of an ankle brace. During that first ritual of Makkhan Lal's, I had the nagging suspicion, lurking somewhere on the edge of my consciousness, that I was under supernatural threat. And in the weeks that followed, as I had my first experiences of these rituals, the thought kept returning that I was in some kind of danger. I began to see bad omens everywhere, began to fear that I was headed toward some kind of supernatural disaster. Sitting in front of my computer screen writing up my research notes, and later converting those notes into a book, it is easy to dismiss these thoughts, and tempting to delete them from this chapter, but when I was actually in the field, surrounded by fierce demons and ghosts, my anxiety was often considerable.[18]

The gurus themselves are not immune to this kind of fear. They, too, recite certain spells to protect themselves from the dark forces. In fact, the first thing that Darpal ever taught me was one of these spells. It was to be recited over a handful of ash, and I was to keep the ash with me at all times. If I ever felt supernaturally threatened, I was to apply some of the ash to my forehead, and I would be safe (see "The Gurus" in chapter 4). I thanked Darpal for his advice, but found another method that worked better for me: Scotch whiskey.

After the first one or two months of research, I went to stay a few days with my old friend R. P. Nautiyal, a lawyer in the nearby town of Gopeshwar. "Bo, my friend," he said to me, "you have entered the world of ghosts. It's time to return to the world of the living." He brought out a bottle of scotch, which we proceeded to dispose of in a long night of drinking, while I told him of my fears. And slowly, they receded. After that, I developed what I thought was an appropriate strategy for this kind of fieldwork. In my previous research, I had always behaved very respectfully toward the gods. Whenever anyone asked me if I "really believed" in the goddess Nanda Devi, I answered "Yes," and it was an honest answer, because I really did feel devotion toward this mountain goddess, who symbolized for me the culture and region to which I had devoted so many years of my life. But now, surrounded by these dark and threatening forces, I adopted a different strategy. When people asked me if I believed in the gods, I said, "No. I think it's all a bunch of superstition!"

But this is precisely the sort of thing that ethnologists are not supposed to say! One is supposed to maintain at least a semblance of neutrality: certainly one should not speak disrespectfully of others' religious beliefs. But I found

that my new strategy worked rather well. Rarely did people seem insulted. After all, many of them were themselves rather skeptical about such matters, and this skepticism was increasing year by year. Usually, they would respond by saying something like, "Oh, so you don't believe in our *devta*s? Well, then, I'll show you! I'll take you to a really powerful oracle, one who will show you her supernatural powers!" So even though my skepticism was more a matter of psychological defense than of actual conviction, it was nevertheless an effective strategy, and people responded by showing me more and more interesting rituals. After all, skepticism of this sort was far from uncommon among local people themselves. Had I allowed myself to take these gods seriously, I might really have been in some kind of psychological danger. To attend such seances night after night, to be surrounded by the music and the dancing and the possession, and at the same time to leave open the possibility that these dark and threatening forces were actually present, would have been spiritually risky.

A more mundane problem was that of caste. When I began this research, I had already worked on and off among the high-caste people of Nauti and its surrounding villages for more than fifteen years, and I had a good reputation among them. I was welcome in their homes, and sometimes even in their kitchens, the purest room of their homes. I ate with them, sometimes I stayed overnight in their houses, and they had even given me a Brahman name—Badri Prasad. Now, one of the main rules of the caste system is that one must not accept cooked food from someone of a lower caste. During those fifteen years or so, I had sometimes accepted food from low-caste people, but always in the privacy of their own homes and never in public. I accepted their food, and told them that in my culture it was perfectly all right to do so, and that I rejected the whole idea of caste. But I also asked them not to tell anyone that I had eaten with them. I was worried that if the high-caste people found out that I was accepting cooked food from the low castes, they might cut off social relations with me. I might find that I was no longer welcome in their homes. But now I began to stay with the Harijans for days at a time, and everyone knew that I was also eating their food.

This problem was especially difficult for Dabar Singh. He was a high-caste farmer, an intelligent but uneducated man who had never even spoken to a foreigner until he met me. But he became my assistant, and for many years, whenever I came to do research, I lived in his house. It was a simple, one-story house when we began to work together in the early 1980s, but over the years, with the money I paid him, he built a second story, and he always said that the house was mine, not his. I watched his children grow up, get married, and have their own children. I shared many of the family's joys and sorrows. But Dabar Singh's ideas about caste were very conservative. He firmly believed that

low-caste people were inferior, dirty and polluting, and he told me in no uncertain terms that I must not accept food from them, otherwise his wife might not allow me to eat in his home any more. This became a great dilemma for me. Dabar Singh was my old friend and my trusted assistant, but now he was telling me that I might be banished from his home if I continued to eat with the low-caste people! Here is another entry from my diary, made at the end of Makkhan Lal's puja:

> Dabar Singh's presence is causing difficulties for me. The Harijans in Mayapuri know that he looks down on them, and they speak less freely when he is here. Today I had enough, and told him to stay behind while I went to Mayapuri by myself. Today was also the day when Makkhan Lal, who had sponsored the ritual, was to pay the guru his fee. Yesterday he asked me for more money in order to do so. I told him I'd already paid enough, that everyone knew I was the real sponsor of this event, including the guru himself, and that I would simply tell the guru not to ask for more. (Two months later, while writing up these notes, I realize that this was a mistake. The guru has to be given his fee: it's an important part of the ritual.) Anyway, I went to Mayapuri alone, and when I got there I was horrified to sense my own reluctance to eat with these low-caste people—not because I feared being polluted by them, but because all my higher-caste friends might find out, and they might ostracize me. I was angry and disgusted with myself for taking this so seriously—shouldn't I be more concerned about the obscenity of caste than about my reputation among the higher castes?
>
> Next day, in the bazaar at Nauti, I heard people whispering about me. One of them said, "If he wants to learn about them then he has to live with them. It's OK"—and his interlocutor agreed. Over the next few days, this became the general attitude toward my new activities. In their own way, the Nautiyals were being rather progressive about this issue, and I was pleased. Finally, Dabar Singh and I came to an understanding: he would tolerate my eating with the Dalits, and I could still eat in his house, but not in his kitchen.

Later in the same diary I noted how the caste problem continued: when I went to the main bazaar in Karanprayag with Sacchu, I deliberately avoided meeting my high-caste acquaintances, worried that they might have heard about my new friends. And my consciousness of the financial issues continued, too. Sacchu's family was involved in a court case for which they needed money; his mother was sick with pneumonia and needed medicine. It was

fortunate for them that I had come along and could help pay for such things. We seemed to be developing a good relationship. Sacchu sat next to me while I recorded my notes on my tape recorder, I said the word *vishvas*—trust—into the microphone so that he could hear, and he smiled knowingly.

The Moral Critique of Fieldwork

During the final two decades of the twentieth century a second critique of ethnographic fieldwork became influential, but it was postcolonial and moral rather than postmodern and epistemological. According to this critique, ethnographers "exoticize" and thereby "objectify" the people and cultures about whom they write, mostly because they focus on cultural difference. Ethnographers are of course specialists in the study of cultural diversity, "merchants of the exotic" as Geertz put it somewhere or other, and we have confronted the problem of representing the Other since long before that word was written with a capital "O." Both as scholars and as persons, we cannot escape from the dialectics of sameness and difference (Narayan 1993), and this gives rise to problems that are not only epistemological but also moral: how should we represent the exotic in our teaching and research? How should we represent the familiar? It would be disingenuous to deny that ethnology's focus on cultural difference is central to the discipline, even though ethnographic questions can certainly be asked of, and ethnographic methods applied to, more familiar terrain. So although exoticism can be denied, such denial ignores the history of the discipline and renounces its keenest pleasures. It would be both more accurate and more productive to say that ethnography strives to make the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic. If the initial object of study—a religious or political movement, an unfamiliar kinship system—is exotic, if it seems strange and puzzling at first, then in the process of learning (and later teaching and writing) about it in its own context, it comes to seem less exotic and more familiar. Conversely, when we closely examine more familiar cultures, they begin to look rather exotic, less natural, more conventional.[19]

But despite the fact that ethnology is to a large extent defined by its interest in otherness, some ethnologists have confessed to a certain embarrassment about cultural difference,[20] and sometimes they appear to want do away with it altogether. But that is not the way for ethnology. Difference is fascinating, it is wonderful, and we should be in the business of celebrating it. Moreover, cultural difference is not only the starting point for ethnography, it is also a methodological necessity. There is and always will be at least one difference between the scholar and her object of study, and that is the difference between

subject and object, the old dichotomy between thought and action, which cannot be avoided in academic life, no matter how much our political agenda or mystical inclinations might inspire us to try (Bell 1992: 48). It is difficult to imagine how academic ethnology could proceed without an object of study, however loosely (or mutually) defined, because the dichotomy of subject and object is a condition of disciplinary knowledge. It is necessary for any theoretical project whatsoever, in the human as well as in the physical sciences. Neither the physicist nor the ethnographer nor the literary critic can pursue her study without objectifying its object, and to make of this an ethical dilemma is like questioning the morality of gravity. Ethnographers certainly have their share of ethical dilemmas, but most of these derive, not from cultural difference, but from economic and political asymmetries (Keesing 1989)—as my own experiences in the field clearly showed.

Bhadulal

The first time I went to meet Bhadulal the guru,[21] I hired a rather large van to get there, but later I regretted the decision. It's best for an ethnologist to blend in by traveling with the locals (in this case an open-air truck built to hold five passengers, but usually jammed with twenty or so); on that first trip, however, I made myself rather conspicuous by spending a great deal of money on a private car arranged by a colleague at the local university: about $12 for the whole day. I justified this self-indulgence by telling myself that I'd never been up that particular valley before, and wasn't really sure about the condition of the roads, or how long it might take to reach my destination. Back then I had promised myself that next time, I would travel in more modest fashion, and so this time I grabbed a seat on a local bus from Gopeshwar, and bounced and rattled my way down the beautiful Alakananda valley, smelling the sweet spring air, watching the fog rising from the mountaintops, and reaching Khankara (where the unpaved road begins) about four hours later. There I found a taxi, but once again I was too impatient (or was I just too wealthy?) to travel like everyone else. Normally they pack fifteen to twenty people in these little vehicles, and I once shared one with twenty-eight other passengers. But today I booked the entire front seat, so that the driver wouldn't wait around to fill it up with passengers, and off we went.

Bhadulal happened to be on the road as we drove up, just as he was the first time I came. The coincidence made me feel like Carlos Castaneda, going to meet Don Juan. He led me to the Harijan hamlet where his large, two-story home with its spacious verandah was located, and I was warmly greeted by

the family members and neighbors I had met several weeks earlier. They were pleased that I had returned, and they took very good care of me. The food was excellent, they gave me a chair and table despite my protests, at night I was given many quilts and slept quite comfortably, and they provided me with lots of tobacco. But despite their hospitality I was frustrated, and rather irritable, because Bhadulal seemed unwilling or unable to talk about himself or his special knowledge. He and I would be in the midst of some animated conversation, but whenever I asked how he had learned to be a guru, or about one of his rituals, he would become uncomfortable, and tell me to wait until dark. So there I sat all the long, hot afternoon, smoking one cigarette after another, waiting. Occasionally I tried to read the book I had brought with me—Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinctions*—but one or another of my hosts, thinking it rude to leave me alone, would come and join me, and I, thinking it rude to read while they sat there, would close the book. And so we sat, hour after hour, making small talk or staring out across the wide valley, to the forested mountains in the distance. But it was worth the wait.

Initially, Bhadulal had promised merely to record some of his songs in a small lower room in his house, where we would not be disturbed. But the villagers heard there was to be a séance, and by the time the sun had set, about fifty of them had come for the performance. And so I had the good fortune to witness Bhadulal's art in a natural setting: his lively voice calling the gods awake, to the pounding of the drum and the shimmering rhythm of the steel platter; the gods suddenly coming over villagers, who leaped shrieking into the tiny space in the midst of the crowd, dancing so violently on their hands and knees that the whole verandah shook, and clouds of dust rose into the thin, cold air. Bhadulal the guru is contending with these gods, laboring to summon them with his music, sweat pouring down his face as he focuses his gaze and his voice on some person who shows the signs of imminent possession; changing his rhythm and his mantras, calling down the gods, building up the atmosphere. He is a master of his art, instantly recognizing the various beings as they possess their human "beasts": Kachiya the lord of filth with his painfully twisted, claw-like hands; Dondiya the protector of Harijan women, who incessantly and vainly strokes his hair between shrieks; Goril the ancient prince of neighboring Kumaon, whose tragic story brings tears to the eyes of all the men, including the guru himself; Devi the benevolent goddess, whose graceful dancing is an island of calm in this sea of enthusiasm.

I am surprised by my own lack of enthusiasm. At the beginning of this research, such performances seemed so magical: exhilarating journeys to an exotic place where anything seemed possible, even the descent of gods into human bodies. But as my familiarity with such events has grown, my enthrallment has

waned, and I am more enchanted by the artistry of the musicians than by the frenzy of the dancers. Is this more professional, or simply more jaded? In any case, there is much work to do: the space is tiny, it is difficult to take photographs of the rapidly moving dancers, and I must cover my cassette recorder with cloth to protect it from the dust, using my tiny flashlight to monitor its settings.

Oh shit, now I've lost the flashlight. My friend Avril gave it to me the day I left Christchurch, and I'm rather attached to it. I search all round; Bhadulal stops playing, and asks me what I'm doing. I tell him, and in the deafening silence that follows, I realize that we now have a problem. He assumes that one of the children sitting next to me has taken the flashlight, and so do I—but I am vociferously denying it, insisting that I must have misplaced it somewhere. Bhadulal loudly and pointedly says how embarrassing it is for him, for all of them, that one of the children should steal my flashlight. Everyone in the room knows the subtext, the stereotypes: "Damned Harijans, low-caste thieves, can't be trusted . . ." This is getting more and more difficult. I would rather just finish the program without the flashlight, instead of suffering such embarrassment on everyone's behalf. Bhadulal announces that if the torch is not returned, then one of the fierce deities will take revenge on the offender. The performance resumes, and in less than half an hour, my torch is miraculously found on the ledge outside the verandah.

Now a new woman begins dancing, and the atmosphere becomes tense and frightened. Bhadulal tells me to turn off my tape recorder, and a man sitting in the shadows leans over and whispers, "It's a ghost." Later I ask Bhadulal why he wanted me to stop recording, but he will not tell me. I ask him again, but he remains silent. It is not until late that night after the performance, before we go to sleep, when he and I are lying together under our shared quilt, that he admits it was the ghost of his brother, who died at an untimely age, and whose three daughters had also subsequently "gotten lost."

Earlier in the day Bhadulal's family had heard me singing in Garhwali, and so, inevitably, the request comes—from Bhadulal I think, partly in order to lighten the mood after the ghost had left. "Sahib," he says in a voice sufficiently loud that all can hear, "these women are requesting you to sing a song or two." So I sing, and the audience is delighted, and afterwards they applaud—something that would be inconceivable after any of Bhadulal's songs. Devi dances, and then Goril dances, and the performance is over.

The next day I reached the university in Shrinagar at noon, and went straight to my friend Professor P. C. Joshi, head of the Anthropology Department. Some students were trying to close down the campus: several had been arrested and jailed at the behest of the university administration, and things were rather tense. But Joshi's office was filled with students, and he was doing

his best to conduct class as usual. The anteroom was filled with students, and it turned out that they were waiting for me to give a lecture on "the importance of fieldwork in ethnology [*manav vigyan mem khsetrakarya ka mahattva*]." I laughed at the formal, awkward-sounding Hindi, and asked Joshi what *khsetrakarya* meant—to which he replied, "It means 'fieldwork'! How else would you translate it?"—and I felt the shock of recognition: the inequality of languages, the postcolonial predicament.

The students were mostly undergraduates, just returned from a one-week introduction to ethnographic research somewhere Garhwal, so they had some idea of the rigors of fieldwork, and they were impressed by my dirty clothes and sweat-stained Garhwali cap. With scant time to prepare, I decided to make just three points: (1) ethnographic fieldwork is the methodology par excellence of ethnologists; (2) it is empirically verifiable, because informants can always dispute what you write; and (3) it is of moral value, because through fieldwork you recognize the humanity (I used the Urdu word *insaniyat*) of the "Other," even as he or she recognizes yours. In the age of ethnic cleansing, I said, a concern for human universals looks more and more like a moral necessity. But I kept thinking about that lost flashlight and its miraculous return.

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2

God of Justice

India's lowest castes suffer at many levels: economic, physical, political, and spiritual. One reads regularly in the newspapers of atrocities of various kinds committed against them: villages burned down because low-caste persons dared to use the wells of higher castes, inter-caste lovers captured and executed by village councils, or even by their own parents, the sexual exploitation of low-caste women, the brutal persecution of those who stand up for their legal rights. If ever there was a "community of suffering," this is it.

In Garhwal, the situation of the lowest castes is not as bad as in other parts of the subcontinent. Elsewhere in India, the lowest castes are often landless, with nothing to sell but their own labor, and caste prejudice is exacerbated by this extreme dependence. In Garhwal, however, as elsewhere in the Central Himalayas, most Harijans have at least a small piece of land, and there are few if any reports of caste atrocities. Still, the suffering of the Harijans in the region is quite real. They endure constant humiliation and discrimination. They are not allowed to enter the homes of the highest castes; they are often addressed as "boy" or "girl," using the familiar pronoun ("tu") that is otherwise reserved for children and animals; they must wash their own cups at the village tea-stall; they are expected to defer to higher castes when they go shopping or ride the bus; and they must endure numerous other insults every day. They usually have much less land than the higher castes, and are therefore often compelled to work for them as dependent day-laborers, with all of the humiliation such

labor entails. One of my Harijan friends, a local schoolteacher, once wept as he told me how, even though he was well-educated and had a permanent, high-status government job, the upper-caste teachers in his village school sat apart and ate separately from him, and their children refused to attend his young son's birthday party even though he was expected to attend theirs.

How do such forms of oppression affect low-caste people? Of course it is risky to generalize about such matters. The level of oppression varies greatly, even between neighboring villages. As Polit (2005) has pointed out, the oppression experienced by Harijans in a village where they constitute the minority and are surrounded by high-caste people is much greater than the oppression experienced by those who live in a village consisting exclusively of other Harijans. Moreover, the youngest generation of low-caste people has been exposed to modern discourses of equality, from the anti–caste discrimination programs of the government which they learn about in school, or watch on the television, or hear on the radio, to the more radical messages of local Dalit activists. The Government of India has tried to eliminate or at least minimize caste discrimination by giving loans to low-caste businessmen, providing places for low-caste people in institutions of higher education and in government service (as teachers, judges, village headmen, regional council members), and taking many other measures. As a result, there is now a younger generation of low caste people—sorted by the government into such categories as "Scheduled Castes" (SCs) and "Other Backward Castes" (OBCs)—that has taken advantage of these programs and is more confident and assertive, more educated and articulate, than their parents' generation.

But for that older generation, forms of insult and stigmatization are so much a part of life that they have been internalized by the Harijans themselves, whose very way of inhabiting their bodies—what Bourdieu would call their *hexis*—reflects this constant oppression and stigmatization. A friend of mine, a brilliant Harijan musician from far-western Garhwal near the border with Himachal Pradesh, inevitably bows and joins his hands in respectful greeting when he meets a higher-caste person. He habitually addresses such persons as "mom and dad" (*ma-bap*), and finds it intolerable to sit while they are standing. Other Harijans of his generation often display the bowed shoulders, the immediate folding of the hands in greeting, the ready smile, the obsequious language, and the avoidance of eye contact that are the hallmarks of Harijan *hexis*.

Caste oppression is also visible in the layout of villages, and in local architecture. The Harijans nearly always live apart from the higher castes, separated by a stream or some other natural feature. Growing prosperity has meant that the traditional two-story houses of the upper castes are increasingly replaced by larger dwellings, made of concrete and fitted with "all the modern conveniences"—

indoor plumbing, kitchens with gas stoves, and so forth. But with few exceptions, the dwellings of the Harijans remain very modest indeed: simple, one-story structures of earth and stone, often in poor repair because of lack of resources, rarely displaying the large flagstone square that is typical of the higher castes.

When you visit a Harijan neighborhood, you might notice a number of tiny shrines scattered about.[1] Just as the houses of the Harijans are modest and simple in comparison with those of the high castes, so these shrines are small, poor structures. Even so, many Harijans cannot afford to build such freestanding shrines, and so they have smaller ones inside their houses. In any case, they proudly display the signs—fire-tongs, tridents, and often a staff of timaru wood[2]—of Bhairav, the deity to whom the Harijans turn when they are abused or exploited, or when they are the victims of injustice.

Who is Bhairav, and how does he appear? In this chapter, I attempt to answer that question. To ask about the "appearance" of Bhairav is to pose a deliberately broad question, since "appearance" can mean so many different things. How and when did the god historically appear? My answer to this question is based on local memory and oral history, as well as oral texts. What does he look like? I will base my answer primarily on descriptions of Bhairav in his songs and rituals. Why does he appear? Why does he enter the everyday world of human beings? In order to answer this question, I will draw on myths and legends, as well as stories that are told about him. Ultimately, I will argue that Bhairav's manifestation in ritual—that is, in the body of a "possessed" devotee—is his most important mode of appearance, and that this particular mode of appearance tells us a great deal about what it means to be a Harijan. But let us return for now to Bhairav's shrines.

There are very few anthropomorphic images of Bhairav in these shrines, though occasionally one finds framed pictures hanging in them, examples of Hindu "calendar art." Most commonly, the shrines contain Bhairav's accoutrements—the trident, fire-tongs, and staff mentioned above. But these are not simple representations of the god; rather, they are his "signs" (*nishan*). In Peirce's terms (Peirce 1932: 157–73), they are indexical of his presence, not merely iconic of his appearance. Actual descriptions of Bhairav are only to be found in his songs and mantras, and that is why, in what follows, I rely so heavily on oral textual material.

The First Appearance of Bhairav

In the Sanskrit tradition, Bhairava (lit., "the terrible one") first appears as the god Virabhadra, who led Shiva's followers when they took revenge on Daksha

Prajapati. The story is one of the most popular Hindu myths: Shiva was married to Sati, the daughter of the sage Daksha, also called Prajapati, the "lord of creatures." Daksha held a fire sacrifice and invited all the gods and sages except his son-in-law Shiva, whom he deliberately insulted by excluding him. Shiva was inclined to ignore the insult, but not Sati. She attended her father's sacrifice and leaped into his sacrificial fire, thereby not only killing herself but also lending her name to the subsequent practice of self-immolation by widows. When Shiva heard what had happened, he was filled with grief and rage, and sent his followers, led by Virabhadra, to take revenge. They decapitated Sati's father, Daksha, and killed many of the sages who had taken part in the sacrifice.[3] In tantric Vajrayana Buddhism as well, Bhairava is strongly associated with the themes of anger, revenge, and violence.[4] In Garhwal, Bhairav appears in a number of forms, several of which will be discussed in this book. His most important cult centers are the temple of Kaleshwar (colloquially known as Kaldu), a few miles east of Karanprayag on the Badrinath road, and the temple of Kothyar near Gair Sain. The form of Bhairav most closely associated with the Harijans is Kachiya, often called Kachiya-Bhairav.[5] Kachiya in turn takes numerous forms, some of which are associated with particular people (for example, the Kachiya of Lalu Das) or places (the Kachiya of Dol village).

The first time I ever heard of Kachiya Bhairav, I was driving along the road with my friend R. P. Nautiyal, a local attorney. It was the monsoon season, and pouring rain. As we passed through the village of Kaleshwar, Nautiyal mentioned that it contained an important temple for a god associated with local Harijans. He said that local people called the place Kaldu Beach (*kaldu bagad*). At that very moment he noticed that Shanti Lal, the local postman and a particularly knowledgeable person, was walking along the road. We stopped and asked him to climb in the car. He agreed to be interviewed, I turned on my tape recorder, and with hardly a pause, Shanti Lal proceeded to tell me how Bhairav first appeared there.

> The local story is that one of our ancestors came from Kumaon. He reached a place near Bhatoli village where two families lived: one of Smiths and one of Musicians.[6] He had brought a very fierce *devta* with him, and when he gave the command, the *devta* would attack[7] people. This kept happening, and the people in Bhatoli became angry. They said, "Either we get rid of this guy, or we murder him." Someone told him that he had better leave, because his life was in danger. So he took the *devta* and his special things—the fire tongs and the timaru staff near the temple—and left. He went to Karanprayag—for people in those days, it was as far as Delhi is for you these days—and

then he came up this way. He slung his basket on his back, came here, and sat down. When he arrived he saw that the land was very good: broad fields, very nice land. He put down his basket, and when he tried to pick it up again, he found that he was unable to do so. He kept trying, but he couldn't lift it! Now he had a problem; he had to stay the night here. And during the night, the *devta* spoke to him through a little bird, saying, "I like this place. I want to stay here." And because he was a very spiritual man, he stayed here.

They say that this old grandfather of ours was very powerful. He would tell the god to bring him tobacco, and the god would bring him tobacco! This was four or five generations ago. Later on the place became very famous, and everyone started giving much respect to the god. They believe that he has a lot of power, and that his decisions are just [*sahi-sahi nirnay*]. But our ancestors thought it inappropriate to build him a temple, and so they didn't. This is because he was staying on the bank of the river, where the cremation ground is. They kept him just as he was. The *tantrik* method is that the god should be kept in the earth itself.[8] And because there is a cremation ground there, with burning corpses and all . . . it's all under his control. Even today. He is the in-charge [of that place] . . . He adjudicates problems, helps people obtain powerful positions, gets them promotions, saves them from destructive quarrels . . . He does all this work for people from the entire area [*kshetra*]. People have faith in him. And the greatest thing is that he is the only power in the hands of the weaker sections of society, the Harijans . . .

There is one more very important thing that I want to tell you, something that is of great importance, not only for our nation but for the whole world, and this is that my ancestors joined two deities together: a Muslim deity and a Hindu deity. Bhairav is a *devta* of the Hindus, Nar Singh is a *devta* of the Hindus, and with them is a Muslim deity whom we call Maminda[9] . . .

If one wants to worship the god, then we will be the priests. The god is pacified [*shant*] only when one of us is there. It's not even necessary that the priest is an adult—he can be a child as well. He can be anyone from the lineage. For example, if I'm in another village, but my son is here, and if by the way the god is angry or something, this can be resolved through our children. If some woman gets sick in that village over there, if the god is showing his anger, if he's punishing her, and if one of our children has gone there for some other reason, then someone may say, "He's a priest of Kaleshwar." And they

may ask the child to apply some of the god's sacred ash [*vibhuti*], and if it's truly Kaleshwar's affliction, then she'll be cured by that ash.

W. S.: Earlier you told me the history of your ancestor. Was his name Kaldu? Is that why they call this place "Kaldu Beach"?

Shanti Lal: This god is Kal Bhairav.[10] They used to call him Kachiya of Kaldu. He was black, so we call him *kala* [black]. And that's why this place is known as Kaldu Beach.

W. S.: An oracle near Nauti told me that the *devta* originated in Dol village, and from there he spread here, and to Kankhul, and to other places.

Shanti Lal: The Kachiya of Dol is this one's class-fellow. What happened in Dol was this: someone buried a child—alive! Some enemy must have done it. The child screamed there under the ground, and died, and his *atma* took the form of a supernatural power, and he became the *devta* of that whole area. And because he was very powerful, he went along with all his *disa-dhyani*s.[11] And that is why he was made the in-charge of the cremation ground here.

R. P. N.: Kachiya is that child?

Shanti Lal: That very child. Even now when he comes in a dream, he takes the form of a child. There are a lot of stories connected to this god—how can I tell them all?

Shanti Lal went on to say that according to local custom, whenever a woman from Dimar (a nearby Brahman village) is married, she always does her *doharagamana* at Kaldu. According to this practice, which has been documented for other nearby regions (Polit 2006; Sax 1991) immediately after the wedding the new bride and her husband visit the main temple(s) at the bride's village in order to seek divine blessings for their marriage. "It's absolutely impossible for anyone to be exempted from this rule," said Shanti Lal. "They all come here to give their first puja." Clearly, he was proud of the fact that the new brides from Dimar do this, which confirmed not only that Kachiya-Bhairav was the dominant local god, but also that even high-caste Brahmans subordinated themselves to him. At one point he told my friend Mr. Nautiyal that his work as a lawyer was rather similar to Kachiya's work: "He alone is our judge, and he is our surgeon. He is our everything. He is our deputy. He is our District Magistrate. I think that our ancestors who settled here, who were of a weaker section (of society) brought him as a helper. Even today, he is a powerful ally."

In this interview, Shanti Lal mentioned several things that are fundamental to local understandings of Bhairav, especially in his form as Kachiya.

These include the fact that he is thought of as a god of justice,[12] that his cult spreads when he accompanies his out-marrying "village daughters" to their new homes, and that he is strongly associated with the Harijans, who are his priests at this particular temple. (Shanti Lal himself belonged to the caste of *tamata* or Coppersmiths who, along with carpenters, are one of the highest-ranked Harijan castes.) Later in the interview, Shanti Lal said that although he and his relatives were the priests of the temple, its traditional guru was a man named Sundaru, whom they invited every two or three years to conduct a ritual to "re-charge" the shrine. He said that Sundaru was descended from the man who warned their ancestor that he should leave, or be killed. And so I went to Top village and located Sundaru, an eighty-year-old man working in the fields (see chapter 1), who told me the following story of the origin of the temple at Kaleshwar:

> There was an Ironsmith named Kukuriya who made various things here in Top, and someone didn't pay him properly, so he called on his *devta* [of whom he was the oracle] for justice, and there was discord and suffering [*kalesh/nuksan*] in that man's family. And this Ironsmith kept doing such things until he had rocked [*hilana*] the whole village.
>
> This was during the rule of the English—it's a very ancient matter. At that time a local aristocrat lived here, and he gave the order: "Finish him off!" The villagers had a meeting, but my ancestor, the god's priest, came and said, "Don't kill him! Banish him—either below Karnaprayag or beyond Diwali Pass!" When they banished him, he took all of the god's signs—firetongs, timaru staff, *phavari*,[13] oil lamp, and so forth—and left. And he covered the pit where the god had lived. How could he leave these things on someone else's land? He went to Kaldu Bagad and put them on the bank of the Ganges. Kukuriya the Ironsmith said to the *devta*, "Brother, if I survive I will worship you! But if I die, who will be left to worship you?" By god's grace, he begged a bit from here and a bit from there, and continued to worship the god. And his descendents [the priests of Kaleshvar] have blossomed.
>
> And Kukuriya swore[14] that no Ironsmith could ever live in Top again [because his fellow smiths had tried to kill him]. There are Ironsmiths in Surani [below the road] and in [the nearby villages of] Khageli and Sem, but not a single one in Top. Some Ironsmiths did come later, and they established [*thap diya*] the god and worshiped him, but they were destroyed nonetheless.

The Appearance of Bhairav as a Savior

In this story, the guru Sundaru confirmed the main elements of Shanti Lal's account: that Kachiya is a god of justice, that his cult spreads when he travels with his devotees (here his oracle, Kukuriya the Ironsmith), and that he is strongly associated with Harijans. These themes are also found in other stories told by low-caste people in Chamoli; stories about how Bhairav appears as a savior who intervenes to rescue weak people when they are exploited and abused by the powerful. I have never heard any of these stories told by a high-caste person: they seem to belong to the Harijans, to be examples of what Scott (1990) calls "hidden transcripts." One particular sentence appears over and over in these stories: "I have no one." When the protagonist utters this sentence, it is a moment of maximum weakness and helplessness, and yet it is at precisely this moment that the god of justice appears, to punish the wicked and bring justice to the oppressed. Moreover, he often seems to do so in response to the protagonist's saying, "I have no one."

One such story is that of Lalu Das, which I reproduce here exactly as it was told to me by the guru Darpal. It should be noted that in Chamoli District, the Das caste of Musicians is the lowest caste, while Bhartwal is one of the highest-ranking Rajput castes.

> Lalu Das lived with his six brothers in Nagpur. He was a very small person. Jasu Bhartwal also lived in Nagpur. He was a very big person. He kept the handcuffs to bind criminals, and he kept the key to the leg irons as well. Lalu Das's family used to plough Jasu Bhartwal's fields and care for his livestock, take them grazing and so on, and they lived on whatever they could salvage from their labors. What happened? One day, one of their children had gone with Jasu Bhartwal's cows and buffalo to graze, when Bhairav manifested himself. His *linga* appeared there, and the buffalo gave all its milk to that *linga*.[15] Naturally Jasu Bhartwal was upset, because he wasn't getting any milk from the buffalo. He thought that the shepherd boy was sitting in the jungle and drinking the buffalo's milk, the bastard! So he took that little boy and cut off his hands and his feet! And when he did this, Lalu's wives cried, "He has amputated our child's hands and his feet!" And the men were very angry and upset, too.
>
> After that, what happened? Bhairav took the form of a yogi and went to a stream of water. It was a cremation ground, with corpses lying around. There was a cave there, and he took up residence in it and lit his *sadhu*'s fire.[16] He just sat there, and didn't worry about his

food and drink. He didn't beg for anything, he just sat. Lalu's senior wife went there to fetch water. She saw the *sadhu* and asked him what he ate. She thought she should ask him, since he had been there for so many weeks and months. She told him that she hadn't even seen him stand up in a long while. He answered, "Mother, I'm just sitting here and worshiping God on an empty stomach." She asked, "Will you eat something?" and he replied, "I will be the support [*vastuk*] of whoever feeds me something." So Lalu's wife went back to her house and took a bit of whatever was cooking there. They were very poor, and they ate whatever came to them: sometimes lentils, sometimes boiled rice, sometimes simply roots and flowers. Now, the *sadhu* had an earthen pot [*handi*].[17] He said, "Mother, you keep putting food in my pot, and I will cook it and eat it." And the woman brought him food, morning and evening.

After that, what happened? It was time to plough. And the *sadhu* spread cholera in the home of Lalu Das. The whole family got sick. Everyone's oxen were in the fields ploughing, but Jasu Bhartwal's oxen remained tied to their posts, because there was no one to plough his fields—all the Harijans were sick. Jasu Bhartwal took his golden staff in his hands, and climbed to the top of a big cliff, and shouted out, "Lalu Das! Lalu Das! Have your sons all died? Everyone is ploughing their fields, but my oxen are still tied to their stakes!" But the Harijans couldn't answer—they were dying! The *sadhu* disappeared. He hid himself. The woman brought food for him, but he wasn't there. She felt very sad, because the *sadhu* had become like a member of her family. But he was gone, so she picked up his pot and took it home and put it on her hearth. She cooked all her food in that pot. And that's how they ate. Then Jasu Bhartwal reached there with his golden staff, and saw that the whole family was lying on the ground, sick, and he put the handcuffs and the leg irons on Lalu Das, and led him away. He put him in his "silver courtyard" [*candni cauk*]. It was midwinter, the month of Paush, and very cold. Snow was falling.

Now, Jasu Bhartwal had seven queens. They were so modest that they didn't bathe during the daytime—they didn't want the sun to see them. And they didn't bathe in the evening either, after the moon had come out. They were chaste wives [*pativrata nari*], so they only bathed at dusk, when there was neither sunlight nor moonlight. When they came out in the evening, they saw that Lalu Das's handcuffs and leg irons were open, and that he had escaped and gone home. They went

inside and told Jasu Bhartwal. He was furious, and said, “Where is the bastard who thinks he’s bigger than me? I have the key! I’m his master! Who has let him loose and taken him away?” They said, “His wife took him away; Lalu Das’s wife saved him!” So Jasu Bhartwal went and found Lalu Das’s wife, and seized her. He shouted, “You whore! You helped him escape!” And her put her in his jail. But at night, Bhairav returned. He loosened the bonds of Lalu Das’s wife, and helped her escape.

After that, the sickness in Lalu Das’s home went away, and everyone improved, but the cholera spread in Jasu Bhartwal’s home. Now, Jasu Bhartwal had seven sons and fourteen grandsons. He had twelve twenties[18] of buffalo, twelve twenties of cows, twelve twenties of goats, twelve twenties of oxen. Gold, silver, riches, grain—he had everything! But still, they got cholera, so he went to an oracle. He reached a pass with a crossroads. Bhairav was sitting there in the form of a *sadhu*. Jasu Bhartwal said, “Greetings, *sadhu*!” and the *sadhu* replied, “Greetings, my disciple. Oh man [*narain*], where are you coming from and where are you going?” Jasu Bhartwal said, “*Sadhu-ji*, do you know how to read palms?” and the *sadhu* answered, “I’ve grown old reading palms.” So Jasu Bhartwal said, “Read my palm, and tell me what my problem is.” The *sadhu* read it and said, “Look brother, do the seven Lalu brothers take care of your livestock, and plough your fields?” Jasu Bhartwal said, “Yes.” “Was there a boy in that family who used to graze your animals?” Jasu Bhartwal said, “Yes.” “Did you amputate his hands and feet?” Jasu Bhartwal said, “Yes.” The *sadhu* said, “He didn’t drink your milk! There was a Bhairav shrine there—it was Bhairav who drank the milk! You did a great injustice when you cut off his hands and feet! And when there was cholera at Lalu Das’s home, did you bind him and bring him to your jail?” Jasu Bhartwal admitted that he had done so. The *sadhu* said, “It was Bhairav who let him go.” Jasu Bhartwal said, “What must I do now?”

Now, Jasu Bhartwal used to do his evening worship while sitting above his big front gate. And the *sadhu* said, “You will have to build a shrine for Bhairav there, and divide all of your grain, wealth, gold, silver, cows, buffalo, and land: seven portions for your sons, and seven portions for Lalu Das’s sons. Are you willing to do it? For seven days, Lalu’s seven brothers will dance at your home. And if they dance along with Bhairav for seven days at your home, and if you make the guru’s ritual seat [*dulaici*] there, then you will retain your wealth—otherwise you will be ruined!” Jasu Bhartwal said, “I’ll do it, Maharaj!

> I'll do just that!" And he divided all his grain, wealth, *maya*, *lakshmi*, and land into fourteen parts, and Lalu and his brothers danced at Jasu Bhartwal's house for seven days. And then Jasu Bhartwal's seven queens also began to dance! Bhairav rocked them, and they danced naked! He possessed those seven chaste wives! "You were so chaste, but now I have destroyed your honor!"

Here Bhairav appears as a renouncer from the Nath order of yogis (see below), and as a savior who provides justice for the poor, low-caste people oppressed by the cruel Jasu Bhartwal. One striking feature of the story is that Bhairav afflicts not only the oppressive Jasu with cholera, but also Lalu Das and his family, evidently as a mark of his favor. This conforms to a common pattern in Hinduism, where certain diseases—especially those associated with pustules and fever, such as smallpox and chicken pox—are regarded as a sign of "possession" or divine selection (Egnor 1984, Nicholas 1981).

Guru Darpal told me the story of Jasu Bhartwal in prose form, but many similar narratives take the form of songs. One example is the song of Puriya Sauryal. I first heard Sacchu sing this song shortly after I met him, and soon after that I recorded it, so that I could listen to it when traveling through the mountains. It became one of my favorite songs—such wonderful dancing music! Once I played it for the portly, low-caste cook of some friends in Mussoorie, and although he was not from Chamoli District, he nevertheless knew the song by heart, and began to dance. Yet none of my high-caste friends in Chamoli knew the song. It was what Scott would call a "hidden transcript" that was, in effect, the collective property of the Harijans. Here it is in a summarized, narrative form:

> There were once seven brothers Samvaryal from Samvari Kot. They were from a Harijan caste. The eldest was named Agmall, the second was named Bagmall, and so on to the youngest, who was named Puriya. He was very proud and haughty: he never helped anyone, never greeted anyone properly, and didn't respect his superiors. One day, Ravana[19] heard about this and he sent his whole army of demons, who caught Puriya and brought him to Ravana's court of law [*kachahari*]. Ravana said, "Puriya Sauryal, you are very proud and haughty, you never help anyone, you never greet anyone properly, and you don't respect your superiors." And Puriya answered, "I'll never do that for anyone." So Ravana said, "Bind his wrists with the handcuffs and his feet with the stocks, and lock him in the *dharmashila* [a pit covered with a rock and fastened shut]. They did so, and for the first time in his life, Puriya began to weep, saying, "Today I have no one: no

> brother, no family, no god." He wept so much that Bhairava and the fifty-two *bahiyal*[20] came, broke the seal of the *dharmashila*, tore open Puriya's restraints, and brought him out.

Sacchu told me that "all the gods appear"—in other words, that many people are possessed—when he sings this song during a ritual. No doubt this is because it expresses not only the oppression of the Harijans, but also a sense of their underlying pride and resistance. The same is true of the song of Umeda and Sumeda, which is in many ways the "mythical charter" for the cult, since it not only explains how Bhairav first came to Garhwal, but also contains many features that also appear in cult rituals. Here I reproduce the story in narrative form, as it was told to me by Guru Darpal on the last day of Makhan Lal's ritual (chapter 1):

> Once upon a time, the high-caste Myur Rajputs of Panthi Bagwan were building a temple. Big rocks had to be cut for this temple, and the Myurs said to the low-caste Coppersmiths, "Fetch the rocks, you bastards!" The Coppersmiths lifted the lighter rocks and brought them, but they left the large rocks behind—they weren't able to lift them. So the Myurs seized them and beat them, and kidnapped their beautiful daughters Umeda and Sumeda, and sold them in slavery to the Gurkhas.
>
> So the girls' fathers Udotu and Sudotu went to Tibet to visit their spiritual teacher, a Tibetan lama. They said to him, "Hey mother's brother, the Myurs have done us a great injustice; they have sold our daughters into slavery, and flayed the skin from our backs. We have no one!" Their story brought tears to the Lama's eyes, and he made a pot, a round red pot. He filled its belly with forty-two heroes [*vir*], fifty-two ghouls [*bahiyal*], eighty-four fierce goddesses [*kali*], sixty-four witches [*jogini*], and ninety man-lions [*narasimha*]. He put all of them in the pot's belly, and told them to "play their game." Then he covered the pot and closed its mouth by tying it with a cloth, and said, "Lift it, sister's son: lift this pot!" Udotu tried to lift it, but it was very heavy. He couldn't lift it, and he said, "Guru, I won't be able to place this pot on my head." So the guru himself lifted it and put it on the coppersmith's head. And he said, "Go, sister's son, and take this red pot to the land of Uttarakhand! Take it to the land of your enemies!"
>
> So the coppersmiths went to Tilkhani Bar. They lay down to sleep, but Sudotu heard a buzzing sound inside the pot. He was curious about what was inside, so he lifted the cover a little bit, and out came Bhairav. Now at this time they were performing a Pandav Lila[21]

> in Dobari Village, and Bhairav took the form of a yogi and reached the village where they were dancing. He said to the villagers, "Give me a nice spot that I can call my own." They said, "Where have you come from, you lazy son of a bitch?" and they beat him and drove him away. He joined his hands in supplication and said, "Give me a bit of land where I can raise buffalo, goats, a few cows and some oxen." They said, "Go! Get out! Where the hell have you come from?" So he took the form of a leopard, and destroyed all their cows, oxen, sheep, goats and buffalo. He cursed them [*dosh lagaya*], and since that day, the Pandavas have never again danced in Dobari. From there, Bhairav went to Kob Bar where the Myurs lived, and exterminated them. He took the form of cholera and killed them all. Two corpses were carried to the cremation ground every day, until the Myurs were totally destroyed.

Once again, we hear familiar elements repeated: Bhairav appears as a renouncer, a Nath yogi, who defends the weak and brings a terrible justice to their powerful oppressors. Certain other aspects of this story also of interest, for example the "red pot," which reappears as a central item in the ritual that establishes a shrine for Bhairav (see "Establishing a Shrine," in chapter 3). It is also very suggestive that according to the story, Bhairav came to Uttarakhand from Tibet, and not from the Indian plains. Bhairav is, in fact, an important deity in Tibetan Buddhism, and most if not all of the gurus I knew said that the tradition in general, and its rituals in particular, came from the other side of the great Himalayan range. They were said to have been brought to Uttarakhand by the so-called Bhotiyas, a high-altitude community that formerly conducted the trade between India and Tibet. Moreover, some of the language of the cult of Bhairav suggests a connection with the tradition of the "eighty-four siddhas," which, as we will see, is closely associated with Tibet as well as with the Kanphata yogi tradition.

The Iconographic Appearance of Bhairav

Many of Bhairav's songs evoke a monk from the Gorakhnath tradition, one of the Kanphata ("split-ear") yogis, so called because fully initiated members of the order split their ears and wear large earrings. This order was very influential in north India during the medieval period. It was allegedly founded by the medieval Hindu ascetic Gorakhnath, who is also associated with the Siddha tradition.[22] In Garhwal, some of Bhairav's mantras mention Gorakhnath, other mantras and stories make reference to his guru Matsyendranath, and still others mention the names of unknown Nath yogis who presumably were

involved in the founding of the cult. When oracles are possessed by Bhairav, or when they call upon him in trance, they often call out "*alak*" and "*adesh*," terms that are associated with the Kanphata tradition. The adjective *alak* (from Sanskrit *alakshana*, "without characteristics") is used by Nath yogis and theologians to designate the formless absolute, while the noun *adesh* ("permission") is conventionally used by Naths when requesting permission to join or leave a group of fellow Naths. The oracle's frequent use of these terms, along with other aspects of the cult, suggests that the Nath order was active at some time in the past in the Central Himalayas (see Chatak 1990: 311), as indeed it was throughout North India. Other items mentioned as part of the iconography of Bhairav and Kachiya Bhairav, and usually also found in their shrines, are associated with renunciation, the worship of Shiva in general, and the Nath order of yogis in particular. These include:

1. a staff of timaru wood (*tejmal ka sotha*)
2. the fire-tongs from "Dhuni Pass" (*dhunidhar ka cimta*—the noun *dhuni* refers to a renouncer's fire; see note 16)
3. a saffron-colored cloth bag (*gerua ki jholi*)
4. a trident surmounting an iron pole (*danda trishul*)
5. a strip of saffron-colored cloth (*path ka mekhala*)
6. a loincloth of iron (*loha araband*)
7. a *langoti* (the cloth that renouncers use to bind their genitals) of stone (*shila ki langoti*), and
8. a *phavari* (see note 13 and illustration 2.1) of stone (*patthar to phavari*).

When Darpal and his son Sacchu act as gurus, they nearly always begin with a praise-song to Bhairav in which the image of a Nath renouncer with these accoutrements finds its most complete expression. The following translation is taken from one such song, recorded live in performance (see appendix, Text 2, for the transliterated original):

1. Victory to the guru, victory to the guru, victory to the deathless swami.
2. What game did the deathless swami play in this world?
3. Other gurus play other music, swami, [but] yours is the music of the Huraki-drum.
4. Which guru split your ears, which guru shaved your head?
5. Which guru told you the path/sect?
6. Who will go with you, who will speak with you, my deathless Siddha?
7. The [timaru] staff will go with you, the fire-tongs will speak.
8. My Siddha swami, you wear a *mekhala* cloth,
9. a *mekhala* cloth, [and you carry] the fire tongs from Dhuni Pass.

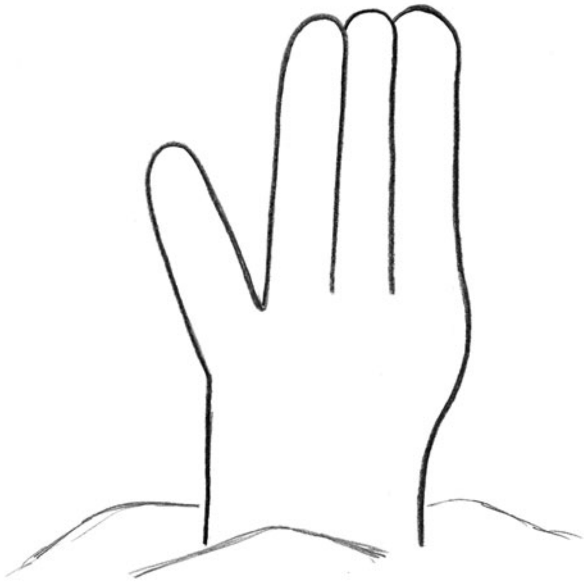


FIGURE 2.1. A *phavari* (drawing by Ariane Petney).

10. My deathless swami, the *phavari* of stone,
11. swami, you [wear] a *langoti* of stone.

[tune change]

12. Guru-ji plays the cruel-hearted music that makes you weep![23]
13. The sound of my drum and the words of my mouth reach your ears.
14. Adesh, Baba! To the great world you created!
15. Adesh, Baba! To all your continents!
16. Of all the continents, Jambudvipa is the first.
17. Adesh, Baba! To your land of Uttarakhand!
18. Adesh, Baba! To the Kailash of your mother's brother [Shiva]!
19. Whose path-finding disciple you are!

[tune change]

20. Adesh, Baba! To the Kob of your Bhairav!
21. In the village of Kob lived Udotu and Sudotu.

[tune change]

22. The coppersmiths Udotu and Sudotu lived in the village of Kob.
23. Oh God! Their daughter was called "Cheta,"
24. and her beautiful daughters were named Umeda and Sumeda . . .

Having summoned Bhairav and praised him, the guru begins to sing the song of Umeda and Sumeda. In effect, the song has changed from an invocatory prayer to a narrative. We will return to this narrative later, but for now, let us remain with Kachiya, the form of Bhairav that is most closely associated with the Harijans. If Bhairav is represented as a Kanphata yogi, then Kachiya is represented as a Aghori *sadhu*, a "left-handed" tantric renouncer. Members of the so-called Aghori (literally, "without fear") sect live in cremation grounds, their meditative practices focus on death, they use the coals of cremation fires to cook their food, and occasionally practice necrophagy (Svoboda 1994, White 1996). The point of their *sadhana* or spiritual practice is to become like infants, to train themselves to cease distinguishing between pure and impure, beautiful and ugly, food and filth. The songs of Kachiya, however, do not concentrate on such theological details, but simply emphasize his impure, disgusting actions. This can be seen in the following song (rather freely translated)[24] that is sung during Kachiya's rituals, particularly when someone is possessed by him (see appendix, Text 3, for the transliterated original).

1. Awaken! Father Kachiya, in your leather blanket,
2. in your house of filth on the burning ground,
3 with your demoness lovers, in the warm springtime,
4. where skeleton waists dance ever around.
5. Awaken, O Kachiya! in this mortal world,
6. where the red-hot skillets dance ever around.
7. Awaken, O Kachiya! at the meeting of rivers,
8. in your leather blanket, in your house of filth.
9. Ghosts wail in pain, but you hear sweet music.
10. Awaken, O Kachiya! half the night here, and half the night there.
11. At Sela Gunja burning ground, you light a torch.
12. At Sela Gunja burning ground, you axe is resounding.
13. The corpses are being chopped into pieces!
14. So awaken! O Kachiya, on Sela Gunja burning ground,
15. where a burning corpse is your fire altar
16. For many long days, no corpses have come!

Darpal continued in Hindi:

> Three hundred and sixty corpses come from Jaunsar, they seize their shrouds and bind them on their heads. Kachiya wears a *bhagoya* [an archaic style of dress where the cloth is crossed over the chest like an X and tied behind the back]; he twirls the corpses by their feet; he fries the corpses' flesh and eats it; he cooks rice pudding in their skulls, and mixed rice and lentils on their funeral pyres.

There is an "aesthetics of horror" at play here, which can be seen in the paradoxically delighted expression of someone relating such gruesome details—for example, Darpal as he explained this song, and others when they told stories of their own experiences of the cult (for example, the Harijan leader's story below). In the songs, Kachiya's own perceptions seem to be the opposite of normal ones. According to one verse, "Ghosts wail in pain but you hear sweet music." When I recorded this song, Darpal spoke the line (probably by mistake) in Hindi rather than in dialect, and subsequently explained, "All the ghosts on the burning ground weep, but Kachiya hears an auspicious wedding song [*mangal git*]." Later, he said that when Kachiya chops up corpses, he uses the blunt edge of the axe instead of the sharp edge.

Kachiya has other forms as well. Many people claim to have seen him at night, or in their dreams, where he appears as a black, hairy, dwarf-like figure. In some of his mantras, he is described as being extremely violent and threatening. When the guru summons Kachiya to appear at the séance, he sings out a series of commands, telling him to "tear up Mt. Meru and come," to "drink the well dry," to come "chewing iron pellets . . . breaking iron bars . . . roaring like a lion . . . roaring like a leopard." Kachiya is told to take away the seats of other gods and replace them with his own. These forms of the god are fierce, they are frightening, and so is Kachiya's most basic form, when he possesses one of his devotees. It is this form—a person possessed by Kachiya—that Garhwalis most often see, and it is probably the one they think of when they picture the god. A person possessed by Kachiya falls to his knees, or crouches on the floor, twists his or her hands painfully—the effect reminds me of a bird claw (figures 2.2 and 2.3)—and often scratches him- or herself uncontrollably. Sacchu once told me that Kachiya does this because, when Shiva sent Virabhadra and his minions to destroy Daksha Prajapati's sacrifice, Kachiya was the last one to return. When he admitted to Shiva that he had not managed to accomplish much, Shiva cursed him to "eat his own flesh," and he has done so ever since.

Such images create an effect of supernatural horror and disgust, involving extreme impurity and the reversal of conventional norms of behavior, and of course this is consistent with Kachiya's songs. Local people told that until a decade or so ago, when Harijans were possessed by Kachiya, they would sometimes go behind the house, to the place were dishwater and rotten food are tossed and where people urinate, and drink the water there, to demonstrate the authenticity of their possession. During Makhan Lal's ritual for his daughter Sapna, the guru Darpal halted the ritual for half an hour or so to have a cigarette break, during which he asked rhetorically, "What sort of people worship Kachiya?" And he answered his own question: "Those of low birth [*nic yoni*]."



FIGURE 2.2. A woman possessed by Kachiya Bhairav (photo by William S. Sax).

After one particularly impressive ritual in Kaleshwar lasting several days, a local Harijan leader gave a speech in which he said that his Harijan brothers and sisters should reject this cult, that they should give it up because it was contributing to their bad reputation among high-caste people and was one of the reasons for their low status. Nevertheless he stayed for the end of the ritual and took part in the concluding feast, and when it was over he told a fascinating story of how once, years before, a particularly effective guru had come to his hamlet and caused practically everyone in it to get possessed. They had all danced to the cremation ground, where they found a half-burned corpse on the riverbank, which some of them began to eat! The next morning, he said, they were in a state of shock. They could hardly believe what had happened, and

swore that they would give up the cult. But because Kachiya had such a strong hold on them as Harijans, they were unable to do so.

Such ideas are not limited to the Harijans. When I asked upper-caste people why Kachiya was so strongly associated with the lower castes, why they seemed to be so much more deeply involved with these matters than the higher castes, they usually said that the lower castes were "weaker," more vulnerable, and therefore more susceptible to him. A local Brahman priest put it like this:

> Bhairav is a divine being, an incarnation of Shiva. And Kachiya is his angry form—he is filled with rage. For example, you are peaceful. But if a certain kind of experience happens to you, you will become very angry. That rage is itself the angry form of Kachiya. . . . He is the god of the lower classes. He does the dirty work, that's why his shrine is below the ground. . . . Kachiya is nothing but *tamas*,[25] he is only the angry form. . . . He goes everywhere. When a great injustice is done and there is no redress, he says, "Let's go," and goes to save them. . . . [Such *devta*s] have power only over a weak man. But they don't have power over someone who knows the scriptures, someone who has knowledge. They belong to weak men. I know this, because I worship all these gods: Bhairav, Kachiya, Narsingh, and so forth. I worship them all. I am their priest. And in my view, based on my experience, these are the gods of weak people, people who have little spiritual power [*atmabal*]. It's like a light-bulb. Light-bulbs are of different strengths. Some are high-power and some are low-power. If too much power comes into a low-power bulb, it will explode.

The Brahman guru Jagdish told me it would be very unlikely that I would ever be afflicted by Bhairav. "You are strong," he said. "You have a healthy body and lots of money, and you are intelligent. You are a big person. But these Harijans are small people. They are poor and weak, and that is why they are vulnerable to all kinds of affliction from the gods and so on. They have no one."

Bhairav's Appearance in the Flesh

Thus far, I have recounted several stories about how Bhairav and Kachiya Bhairav first appeared in Chamoli. These stories do not correspond to the classical Sanskrit myths about Bhairava, but are instead the "property" of the Harijans, their "hidden transcripts." In these stories, Bhairav appears as a Nath yogi who helps the poor and the oppressed, while Kachiya Bhairav appears as a tantric Aghori renouncer closely associated with the Harijans. I have reproduced these myths

and iconographies in language, but words on a page are far removed from the way that Bhairav and Kachiya Bhairav are actually experienced in the lives of the people of Chamoli. Such stories are never read in a book; rather, they are *performed* as songs, and indeed the singing of these songs is one of the most powerful techniques for summoning the god and making him present. The songs are never sung in private, but always on a ritual occasion. Even when I asked the gurus to sing them into my tape recorder, we first had to purify the atmosphere, to pray and light some incense. And a full-scale ritual is involves very much more than that. Many people, friends and relatives, gather at night, expecting to be visited by fierce and unpredictable deities. There is an atmosphere of excitement, a crush of warm bodies packed tightly together on the earthen floor. The music is strange and exciting: the high-pitched clanging of



FIGURE 2.3. The twisted hands of a person possessed by Kachiya Bhairav (photo by William S. Sax).

the inverted metal platter rapidly beaten with two wooden sticks, the voice of the guru reaching out above the weird sounds of his two-headed Huraki drum with its unmistakable "*vhoo-vhoo!*" sound, the hypnotic echo of the third musician, a singer who echoes the final words of every line sung by the guru. When the performance is effective, the atmosphere is charged, and many persons dance and/or become possessed. This is called *siddhi*, "supernatural power," and it has an electrifying impact. The crucial line is "I have no one." In rural India, as in many traditional societies, political and social power is measured by the number of one's allies. A large family, many followers, or the backing of well-armed caste-fellows go far toward ensuring one's safety and prosperity. These are precisely the things that the poor Harijan person does not have. Families may be large, but they split apart because there is so little land. Poor men have no followers, and Harijans are not permitted to arm themselves. Uttering the line "I have no one" expresses the truth of the situation in which the poor, low-caste man finds himself: alone and vulnerable. But at the same time, it invites and anticipates a religious response: the assertion that one is not truly alone, and that Bhairav or Kachiya Bhairav will appear and provide justice, just like in the songs. When the line "I have no one" is sung, it is a cue for possession to occur. Many listeners fall into trance; women loosen their hair so that it hangs loosely, then whip it back and forth in the air as they "dance" wildly, on their knees, to the beat of the drum; people roll about on the floor, grimacing and writhing in pain, their hands twisted into the shape of a bird-like claw, the characteristic sign of possession by Kachiya. This is the most persuasive and powerful appearance of the god, more compelling than any iconographic description and more immediate than any story. Kachiya possesses a person sitting next to you, and he is visibly transformed: the bared teeth, the bent waist, the dancing on his knees on the floor, the cramped and claw-like hands. This is the "appearance" of Kachiya in two important senses: it is *how* he manifests himself, and it is *what* he looks like. It is the physical embodiment of the *devta*, seen by devotees often enough to persuade them that he is quite real. Indeed, when I asked my friends if they "really believed" in Kachiya, their most common response was, "Of course I do! How could I not believe in him? He comes and dances, and you can see him right there in front of you!"

This is the pivotal moment of the rituals, when myth and iconography, context and social memory, power and morality, all come together. It is the moment when, as Geertz puts it, "the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world" (1973: 112). From the local people's point of view, such ritual possession confirms the power and presence of the *devta*. If possession does not occur, then the ritual has failed. Possession defines the moment of maximum

ritual efficacy, and this is always a performative moment. But what, exactly, does it mean to say that possession by Kachiya is "performative"?

In the first place, it is performative because at the core of the ritual is a musical performance in which the guru summons the god by singing the stories of Puriya, Umeda and Sumeda, and the others. Bauman has defined performance as "a mode of spoken verbal communication [that] consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (1978: 11). For Baumann, such competence is demonstrated by the ability to speak in socially appropriate ways, and it is evaluated by an audience, which judges the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of it. This definition can be applied to the performances of gurus, who assume responsibility to an audience (their clients) for a display of ritual competence (a successful ritual). The audience does not merely assume that the guru has such competence. Sometimes gurus fail, or they compete to outdo one other. A guru's success in summoning and controlling a deity like Bhairav is never guaranteed. The relationship between guru and *devta* can be highly agonistic (see chapter 4), and the guru often has to strive mightily to make the god appear at all. This "striving" is primarily musical and performative—the guru uses his drum, his songs, and his mantras to compel the god to appear and dance. And the markers of success, the signs of competence, are also dramatic and performative: in particular the *siddhi* or power that is generated by the guru's music. It is by such markers—especially an exciting atmosphere, and the appearance of the god—that the audience judges the efficacy of a performance, and the authenticity of the god's appearance.

There is another important sense in which possession by the god is "performative." In recent discussions of ritual, Austin's theory of performativity in speech has received a great deal of attention. Austin argued (1962) that many forms of speech, including ritual speech, are not merely descriptive statements about the external world that can or should be evaluated according to their propositional content, as a positivist might. In many cases, to make an utterance is also to perform an act, and should be evaluated as such. When I make a promise, take a vow, or greet someone, it makes no sense to evaluate my utterance in terms of its propositional content. In other words, when I say "Hello" to you, it makes no sense to ask of this utterance "Is it true?" Rather, my utterance should be evaluated in terms of whether or not it has been successful ("felicitious" in Austin's terms). The appropriate question to ask of my utterance "Hello" is, "Have I successfully greeted you?" An important implication of Austin's model—but one that is not noticed as often as it should be—is that successful performative utterances (or "felicitious perlocutionary acts" as Austin puts it) index antecedent social conditions. This is obvious enough in

the case of ritual and ceremonial speech. When the priest says, "I now pronounce you man and wife," or the judge says, "I sentence you to five years in jail," the speech act will be efficacious only if particular antecedent social conditions have been fulfilled: the priest must be properly ordained and legally entitled to conduct weddings, the bride and groom must be willing to enter into the marriage contract; the judge must be legally empowered to pronounce the sentence. Austin's accomplishment was to turn the attention of linguists and philosophers of language away from purely formal, linguistic analysis along logical positivist lines, and toward the social conditions and contexts of actual language use.

Can we say that the ritual appearance of Kachiya-Bhairav in the body of a possessed person is "performative" in this Austinian sense? Perhaps we can, but only to a limited extent. Of course the rituals (which I will describe at length in the next chapter) contain many examples of performative speech, as, for example, when the guru removes the "nails" afflicting a sick patient.[26] And the summoning of the god is an illocutionary act (in this case, a "summoning") with hoped-for perlocutionary effects (the appearance of the god) that index antecedent social conditions (the guru must be a "real" guru who has knowledge of effective mantras and so forth). When the god is reluctant to come—and this often happens—then the guru commands or even threatens him.[27] Members of the audience, on the other hand, may plead, beg, and entreat the deity to have mercy on them, to come and hear their prayers (cf. Schömbucher 2006). All of these are illocutionary acts, and thus by definition "performative" in the Austinian sense.

But our question is, "How does the god appear?" and more specifically, how does a song like the song of Umeda and Sumeda work to bring about his appearance? In other words, why does it cause possession, sometimes so powerfully that *siddhi* seems to roll in waves across the audience? Why does the recitation of these songs have such an intense emotional impact? It seems to me that Austinian performativity does not take us far in answering this question. The appearance of the god is not the perlocutionary effect of an illocutionary act. In fact, it is not a linguistic phenomenon at all. Rather, it is an embodied experience. The god "dances" (*nacna*) or is "made to dance" (*nacana*) by the guru; he "comes/sits on the head" of (*sir pe ana/ baithna*) or "comes over" (*upar ana*) the possessed person, referred to as the god's "beast" (*pasva*) or "little horsie" (*dungariya*). Kachiya Bhairav appears *in the body* of a possessed person: his appearance is a matter of embodiment, not of language. It calls for a hermeneutics of the body rather than a hermeneutics of the text.

And yet a hermeneutics of the body is much more difficult to conceive than a hermeneutics of the text, for all the reasons that Connerton suggests in

his brilliant study of social memory. “Inscribing practices,” he writes “have always formed the privileged story, incorporating practices the neglected story, in the history of hermeneutics” (1989: 100–101). Hermeneutics has always taken inscription as its privileged object, not only because it arose from philology and inevitably returns to it, but also because hermeneutic activity itself became a textualized object of reflection. And all of this—the interpretation of texts and the textual interpretation of the interpretation of texts—is facilitated by the fact that texts are fixed, that they have an independence and a solidity that body practices such as possession lack. They are permanent and objectified, and thus lend themselves much more easily to the interpretations of a hermeneutic community. Similarly in the natural sciences, argues Connerton, the body was “materialised,” regarded as one material object amongst others, so that bodily practices were “lost from view.”

> A newly-constituted object-domain, the communication of meaning according to rules, could in principle include the body in its domain but in practice it did so only peripherally. The object-domain of hermeneutics was defined in terms of what was taken to be the distinctive feature of the human species, first consciousness and later language. . . . When the defining feature of the human species was seen as language, the body was ‘readable’ as a text or code, but the body is regarded as the arbitrary bearer of meanings; bodily practices are acknowledged, but in an etherealised form (1989: 101).

To put it simply, texts are easier to interpret than bodily practices, and this is why so much interpretive social science privileges the text; why, as Jackson put it in an early article on the topic, “the ‘anthropology of the body’ has been vitiated by a tendency to interpret embodied experience in terms of cognitive and linguistic models of meaning” (1983: 328); why language rather than the body is taken as a privileged metaphor—or even as a model of—society; why “performativity” is for Bauman primarily linguistic and not bodily; why even this chapter has threatened to become a discussion of texts and songs rather than the embodied performances that are the most basic form of the “appearance” of the *devta*. I chose to begin this chapter with songs and texts because I address a community of readers whose hermeneutics is primarily textual, but even now, when I turn to bodily practice, I inevitably transform it into text by *writing* about it. The textual inscription of practice is (practically speaking) impossible to avoid.

Nevertheless, I want to attempt a hermeneutics of the body, the contorted body, the body in pain, which marks the appearance of Kachiya Bhairav. This body is so powerfully transformed, so disturbing and even frightening, and at

the same time it is so central to the cult of Kachiya, that it calls out for interpretation. And the interpretation that suggests itself is the one that was made by many of my informants, and that is repeated over and over in Kachiya's songs and stories: that his suffering is the suffering of the Harijan. This, I believe, is what Guru Darpal meant when he said that only those of "low birth" worship Kachiya; it is the reason why the Harijan political leader urged his followers to give up worshiping Kachiya; it is the reason why, according to the Brahman priests, Kachiya attaches himself to "weak" and low-caste people; it even explains why Kachiya loves these people so much, and why he always comes to their rescue.

In order to understand this whole complex we can invoke yet another notion of performativity, that of Judith Butler (1990, 1993; see also Salih 2002). It is important to emphasize at the outset that Butlerian "performativity" is neither dramatic performance nor Austinian performativity. For Butler, performativity is unconscious, unwilled mimesis. It is the way one learns to be a female or a male—primarily by imitating others, by conforming to the (heterosexual) "law" and *performing* masculinity or femininity until one becomes that which one has performed. One *learns to* be a man or a woman at the same time that one is *defined as* such, primarily through discursive practices like speech acts. One of the more controversial of Butler's assertions is that such discursive speech acts, along with the mimetic activity of the subject who performatively embodies the ideology ("the law") lying behind them, actually *create* the gendered body. Accordingly, she has been criticized for defending the absurd proposition that physiological differences are socially created. But in the end, Butler does not argue for pure social constructionism. Although discursive performativity appears, like an Austinian speech act, to produce what it names (that is, although gender appears to be performatively produced), its power to do so actually derives from a structuring law. For Butler, this is the law of patriarchy. Can we not also speak in this sense of the law of caste?[28] Caste is also performatively produced, and that is why I began this chapter by describing the bodily *hexis* of Harijans, so as to illustrate how "being a Harijan" (or being a Brahman, for that matter) is something that one learns to do, not by studying a set of rules, but rather in everyday interactions like greeting, purchasing a cup of tea, or riding a bus.[29]

For Butler, the strength and enduring nature of gender lies in its being continuously performed, in a thousand little dramas of reiteration and interpellation. But what about the extraordinary, non-mundane actions that we call "rituals"? As I have argued elsewhere (Sax 1991, 1995, 2000, 2002), public rituals are the sites par excellence where identities and relationships are created, re-affirmed, reiterated, and sometimes reconfigured. As self-defining actions,

rituals are powerful precisely because they do not work simply at the level of language, but at the more fundamental level of the body. This is what Connerton means when he argues that collective, social memory consists of "images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past . . . [that] are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances" (1989: 3–4).[30] And that is, after all, how the story of Umeda and Sumeda is understood, as a founding event in the collective and religious history of local Harijans that, when recited in the context of a ritual, causes a profound change in the consciousness of the (largely or exclusively) Harijan audience, resulting in possession by the *devta*. But the possessed body is contorted and in pain, because what is being collectively affirmed here is not simply an historical event, but rather the whole experience of suffering and affliction that is the mutual bond of the Harijans. This is why the song is almost never performed in front of the higher castes.

In short, I am arguing that the songs of Puriya, Umeda and Sumeda, and more generally the appearance of Kachiya in the painfully contorted bodies of his subjects, constitute a collective creation of identity through ritual performance. But is the memory only a memory of suffering? Is the Harijan body only a body in pain? Is there no way out of this circle of embodied suffering and injustice? Here again we can draw on Butler, who insists that because the gendered subject is itself a product of disursive performativity, it cannot transcend the law that fashions it. One does not choose one's caste or gender role like an actor in a play; rather one is more or less constrained to play a particular role. If there is to be subversion and change, says Butler, then it must express itself in those practices themselves. This is the issue of agency, and it is the subject of chapter 4.

3

Landscape, Memory, and Ritual

In chapter 1, I described how I did the ethnography that led to this book; in chapter 2, I described the main *devta*s of the healing cult; and in chapter 4 I will introduce the healers. But first it is important to have some idea of what it is that they do. What healing rituals do they perform? How and when are these rituals done? For whom are they done, and why? Ritual healing in Chamoli District involves two distinct kinds of ritual practitioners. On the one hand are the oracles, who diagnose the causes of affliction while in trance and prescribe the appropriate therapeutic rituals, and on the other hand are the gurus who perform those rituals. In the next chapter I discuss oracles and gurus at length, along with their life stories in their own words. This chapter focuses on oracular consultations and the major healing rituals.

Local notions place and landscape are of fundamental importance in oracular consultations as well as in healing rituals, and in this chapter they function as a kind of lens through which to observe and understand the healing cult in general. Ethnographic description typically focuses on social relationships, and this will be the case later in this book, too. But the experience and transmission of the cult of Bhairav is inseparable from local understandings of place and landscape, especially the way that landscape embodies history, memory, and notions of the person. That is why, in order to grasp the cult "from the inside," I focus in this chapter on ideas and practices associated with place and landscape. They are perhaps

difficult to grasp at first, because they differ so markedly from modern ones. As the physicist Roger Jones has noted, the modern conception of "space" is of something that is "rigid, divisible, compartmentalized, empty, lifeless, incompressible, impenetrable, external, remote, and of infinite reach. It is the background, par excellence, from which an identity may emerge. It is the medium in which we are singled out and localized as unique and distinct entities" (1982: 186).

Such a conception of space, argues Jones, does not reflect the natural world, nor does it correspond to contemporary physicists' models of space. Like the idea of "modernity" so brilliantly analyzed by Latour (1993), this notion of "space" is more an ideology than it is a description. It is a cultural model, with its roots in Euro-American historical experience. Jones argues that this model is a perfect metaphor for the modern experience of separation, extension, individuation, and alienation. We cannot even conceive of existence except in space: it is the background from which we emerge, and in which we become individuated and unique beings. The other side of the coin, however, is alienated isolation. Our basic spatial metaphor is intimately linked with fears and apprehensions about life, death, and survival.

Now it may be, as Jones suggests, that modern people have persuaded themselves of the reality of this conception, and that a certain kind of alienation is the result. But in general, and from a comparative ethnographic perspective, it is clear that the modern concept of an abstract, empty, universal, pre-cultural or even non-cultural space does not correspond to human experience. Human beings always already live in the midst of what the phenomenologist Casey calls a "teeming place-world" (1996: 16). Casey goes on to criticize some rather highly regarded anthropological studies of "space" for incorporating assumptions rather like those that Jones criticizes, assumptions that "space" is somehow universal and pre-cultural, and only later "filled up" with subsistence activities, human settlements, history, and so forth.[1] According to Casey, these studies assume that "to begin with there is some empty and innocent spatial spread, waiting, as it were, for cultural configurations to render it placeful. But when does this 'to begin with' exist? And where is it located?" (1996: 14). Casey proposes to focus instead, not on the abstract, modern category of "space," but rather on the lived-in *places* of human experience. To focus on places is to focus on experiences of dwelling, embodiment, and movement. Ultimately, such a focus will lead us to the conclusion that a place is not so much a thing as it is an event (Casey 1996: 26). This seems a fruitful approach for ethnographers, and because it starts with human activity rather than with ostensibly universal categories, it offers the opportunity of grasping indigenous conceptions "from the inside." And that is why, in following Casey's suggestion, this chapter is not

so much sociological as it is ontological, since I am attempting to describe the fundamental assumptions that lie behind healing rituals in Chamoli.

Why do I focus so directly on *rituals* of place? As I argued in chapter 2, public rituals are collective acts of definition. They are the medium through which a group represents itself, both to itself and to others. In performing a ritual, the group says in effect, "This is us, and these are our mutual relationships," and the warrant for the reality of those relationships is the fact that people openly and publicly participate in the rituals. Of course, many different kinds of places are important in the lives of individual persons, but when a particular place is singled out in ritual—a mosque or church, a sacred site, a memorial, a place of heroic sacrifice—then it achieves a heightened importance. By the same token, the public and ritual representation of "platial" relations gives them an authoritative, hegemonic character. That is why the order of a procession, or the arrangement of speakers on stage, is so important. Who leads the procession? Who carries the sacred object? Who speaks first? Who speaks last? All of these things are not merely *representative* of relations between those involved, but rather *constitutive* of them (see Sax 2002, Introduction). Let us have a look, then, at the "platial" aspect of healing rituals in Chamoli District, and see what it can tell us about local persons, landscapes, and society.

The Land of the Gods

Chamoli District is part of the former Hindu Kingdom of Garhwal in the Central Himalayas. Local people refer to the area as *devabhumi*, "the land of the gods." The same term is used for neighboring regions in the Himalayas as well, including Kumaon and Himachal Pradesh, but Garhwal has perhaps the best claim to the term, since it contains so many world-famous pilgrimage places. Prominent among these are the so-called *char dham* or "four abodes" of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Jamnotri. Badrinath is an ancient pilgrimage place, already mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, and one of a still larger and more encompassing set of "four abodes" at the four corners of kite-shaped India, believed to have been established by the ninth-century Hindu philosopher Shankaracharya.[2] It draws Hindu pilgrims from all over India, indeed from all over the world, as does nearby Kedarnath, a shrine that is one of the twelve *jyotirlinga* or "*linga*s of light" sacred to Shiva. Other important pilgrimages places located in Garhwal include Gangotri at the source of the Ganges river and Jamnotri at the source of the Yamuna river.

But these places are not especially relevant to the cult of affliction that is the topic of this book. Why not? Possibly because they are experientially distant.

Local peasants seldom visit them, perhaps only once or twice in their lives, whereas they visit the *devtas*' shrines often, in order to solve their immediate problems. Local shrines are also important because they are part of a landscape to which people are deeply and substantially related. It is widely believed in South Asia that people and the places where they live are mutually determining, as a number of ethnographies have shown (Daniel 1984, D. Mines 2005, Moore 1985, Sax 1991). The air one breathes, the water one drinks, the soil in which one grows one's food—all of these affect one's body and mind, and the village environment is in turn affected by the people who work its soil, care for it, perform rituals on it, and return their waste products to it. This is not an abstract or sentimental connection, but rather a matter of shared mutual substance. You are not only "what you eat" but also "where you live," so that in a very real sense the substantial and moral natures of the villagers of Chamoli are partly determined by their constant transactions with the houses, villages, fields, and forests that make up their environment. And as I will argue in this chapter, their personal histories are inscribed in this local landscape—as are the histories of their gods.

The Oracular Consultation

Borrowing from Victor Turner, I refer to the healing cult of Bhairav as a "cult of affliction" and not simply of healing. Physical healing and illness are indeed central to the cult, but they are not its exclusive concern. Many kinds of affliction lead people to consult oracles, not only illness but also financial problems, runaway children, difficulties at school, a run of bad luck, family problems, and so forth. When someone is afflicted by such problems and cannot determine their cause, then he or she often consults an oracle, a *puchhwari*. The term *puchhwari* is a kind of pun, because it sounds like the word *pujari* or temple priest. A *puchhwari* is not a priest, however, but rather a person who is possessed by a god or goddess, and who diagnoses the causes of illness while in trance. In Hindi, the word *puchhna* means "to ask," and a *puchh* is a question, so a *puchhwari* is the one who answers your questions—in short, an oracle.

The procedure for consulting an oracle is simple. One takes 1.25 rupees and a handful of rice from one's home and circles them over the heads of everyone in the family, including the livestock, so that they absorb the atmosphere or the energies of the household.[3] One then binds them in a handkerchief or a small bag, and takes them to the oracle, who "reads" the condition of the family in the rice grains, euphemistically called "pearls" (*motim*) in this context. One can also bring along a handful of soil from one's land, especially if the problem

has to do with a property dispute.[4] Normally, one visits the *puchhwari* on a Tuesday or a Saturday, days that are believed to be appropriate for such activities. If the oracle has a good reputation, then a number of other clients may already be there, so that one has to wait one's turn. When it comes, one empties the rice and the Rs. 1.25 into the oracle's *thali* or metal platter, and the oracle begins to "play the rice." This is usually done by tossing it up and down in the *thali* as if it were a winnowing pan, or by picking up handfuls of rice and flinging them on to the platter in rapid succession, although there are other methods too. The rapid, rhythmic movement helps the oracle to fall into trance, which is indicated by changes in voice, posture, and so forth. Then the actual consultation begins: a conversation between the client and a deity, who temporarily inhabits the oracle's body and speaks through him. I have reproduced excerpts from several oracular consultations below, a well as in the case studies "A 'Pension' for the God," "A Family Quarrel," and "The Forgotten Shrine" (chapter 5), "A Ghost Diagnosis" (chapter 6), and in chapter 7.

There are several things to be noted about these consultations. First of all, they often take the form of what might be called a "logic tree," at least during the initial phase. In other words, the oracle asks a series of questions that are meant to be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." One of the first questions is usually "Two legs or four legs?" In other words, is it a person who is afflicted, or an animal? If the client answers, "Two legs," then the oracle asks, "Man or woman?" and if the client says, "Woman," then the oracle may ask if it is a wife or a daughter. Here is a typical stretch of dialogue:

ORACLE: Two legs or four legs? I stop nothing! I hide nothing! I see that it is the path of a person, a woman.

CLIENT: Yes.

ORACLE: You're not asking about another woman, but about your own. It's for your own woman: place your hand on the rice! I see it's not a male problem. You've asked other oracles?

CLIENT: Yes

ORACLE: You've "played" the rice, but gotten no relief [*gun*]. I'll use these rice grains to tell you a successful path: I won't let her suffer defeat. [The oracle whistles and tosses the rice grains into the air.] Look, have you worshiped the *chhal*[5] or not?

CLIENT: No.

ORACLE: I see that you haven't worshiped any *chhal*. You haven't worshiped anywhere else. Do you understand?

CLIENT: Yes.

ORACLE: I see the one who suffers time and again. She suffers, doesn't she?

CLIENT: Yes.

ORACLE: You've had no result from your previous inquiries?

CLIENT: No.

ORACLE: I see that this is a *chhal* from her natal home. Look, is her home in the east or not?

CLIENT: What can I say? She has three natal homes.

Clearly, the oracular consultation is not simply a matter of supernatural revelation. It involves eliciting information from the client. It is a *conversation* in which the client must participate. A number of factors complicate the situation, so that the elicitation of information is not quite so brazen as the excerpt above might suggest. For one thing, such "yes or no" questions are much more frequent at the beginning of a consultation, when the oracle is attempting to discover the general parameters of the affliction, than during the subsequent parts, when the details and the causes of the affliction are explored. Moreover, clients are sometimes skeptical, and refuse to answer the oracle's questions, in effect saying, "You are the one who is supposed to have supernatural powers—*you* tell *me* what the affliction is!"

Nevertheless it is important to stress that the oracular consultation works best when it is a true conversation between oracle and client. This explains why the oracles frequently say such things as, "Answer properly! Say 'Yes' or 'No'!" In effect, this is an invitation (or a command) to the client to respond to the questions, to tell the oracle if he or she is on the right track. The oracle is helping the client to remember, to compose a plausible story that will explain the cause of his suffering, a story that, as we shall see, often involves a quarrel, or a ritual mistake of some kind, or the action of an enemy. That is why the client must bring rice or soil from his home. Because the client shares both his substance and his history with it, the soil (or the rice grown in it) also contains traces of that substance and that history. The oracle tosses rice grains in the air a few times, catching them in his or her hand, and then stops. Perhaps there are three grains left in the palm, two of them next to each other and a third to the side. The oracle might interpret this constellation by saying that there are three brothers, one of whom is estranged from the others; or perhaps that there are two houses next to each other, and a third house at some distance from them, with which there has been a quarrel. When the oracle success-

fully identifies an affliction, or suggests a plausible cause, then the diagnosis begins to take shape. As the Garhwalis say, "the path emerges" (*rasta nikalta hai*). This is the central metaphor of an oracular consultation: the emergence of the path.

And what, precisely, is this "path"? It is the path to the source of the affliction. In interviews, oracles said that while in trance they really do see objects in the landscape: houses, trees, streams, temples, shrines, people, and so forth. And not only do they see these places, they also see events that occurred there, things that led to the client's affliction. In other words, the oracles "see" the history of the client and his family, as it is embodied in the landscape. What kind of history is this? As I will argue at length in chapter 5, family unity is one of the most basic moral values in Garhwal, and disturbed family relations are the most common cause of affliction. Therefore, what the oracle often "sees" in the rice grains are precisely these disturbed relations, this compromised unity: there was a quarrel in this house, there was a fight over that piece of land. Often some *devta* or other has been invoked to provide justice to a person who feels that he was wronged. This *devta* is the afflicting agent, and as the path becomes clearer, the oracle sees him as well. Here is a short stretch of dialogue from an oracular consultation performed by Surendra from Gair Sain, in which the client addresses the oracle as "Bhagwan" or "God":

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer,[6] the inquiry [*jacna*] is about a member of your family; you haven't come bringing someone else's question.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, it's an inquiry about a person. It's not a nursing babe, it's not someone with an old body. It's a tender young woman.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: She's not so sick that she's lying on her cot. She's mentally disturbed.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: One profits from one's deeds, wayfarer. It's not a *chhal*, it's an affliction from one of your chosen gods [*ishth*]. Look, wayfarer, she's mentally disturbed, isn't she?

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan, yes.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, if the path doesn't emerge, then stop me from traveling.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, it's not the affliction of a crafty demon, it's not from a little sprite [*kat kapat chhal chidra ka lek dosh nahim*]. It's a divine affliction [*devdosh*] emerging in my platter, oh wayfarer.

CLIENT: But what kind of affliction [*takaja*] is it, Bhagwan? When she's all grown up, then why is she afflicted? Why is she afflicted, when people are praying and singing hymns [*bhajan*] in the house?

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, I have to seize the root [of the affliction]. She's not so sick that she's lying on her cot. Look, everyone in the family is afflicted, from the old to the young, aren't they?

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, the woman is always afflicted, isn't she?

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, it's not just one person, but the whole family that is afflicted, isn't it?

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: This inquiry is about the whole family, isn't it? And the first place there [in the platter] is that of a child.

CLIENT: I am so distressed . . .

ORACLE: Wayfarer, it's not so bad that they are lying on their cots!

CLIENT: No, Bhagwan, it's not like that . . .

ORACLE: Sometimes they are all right, sometimes they disturbed . . . In my holy shrine, in my holy place, right now, one of the elder lines is estranged.

CLIENT: Yes.

ORACLE: Wayfarer, an estranged line is emerging, and it's not just your family, it's all three families who are disturbed! It's a collective shrine [*sanjayat sthan*] and look, wayfarer—a child is at issue!

This excerpt, and the ones that follow in this and later chapters, are good examples of Casey's argument that places "gather" experiences and memories. A familiar place often triggers personal memories, and no doubt this "triggering" effect is even stronger for the peasants of Chamoli district, who perceive an intimate and substantial connection between the landscape and their bodies. Above all, it is the family shrine that gathers memories of unity and discord. Casey makes this point when he draws what he calls the "heretical"

inference that "space and time are contained in places rather than places in them" (1996: 44).

The places mentioned in these oracular sessions also form links between remembering and forgetting. Recall that the oracle is helping the client to build a plausible story about the cause of his affliction, and this story often turns on a family quarrel. Of course, everyone has family quarrels, from Chamoli to Chicago, and when they escalate, people sometimes curse each other. But whereas the American is apt to say, "Damn you!" or "Go to hell!" the Chamoli peasant is more likely to call on his family god: "May Bhairav see to you!" The American "curse" is simply an expression of anger, but people in Chamoli believe that this kind of speech can lead to disastrous consequences. To curse a member of one's own family is morally unacceptable, it is forbidden,[7] and yet in the heat of the moment, when one feels that one is a victim of the other's injustice, one sometimes does the unthinkable and utters the curse. Later, the quarrelling parties' tempers may cool, they make stop fighting and make up, so that the quarrel is eventually forgotten altogether. But years later, when someone is afflicted, the oracle says something like, "the path is emerging, the path leads to a house, you had a quarrel over this house!" The client denies it, but the oracle insists—possibly the fight was in a previous generation, even the grandparents' generation. Then the client remembers hearing of such a quarrel. After all, in most families there has been a quarrel over land in past few generations. Or perhaps a woman is afflicted and visits an oracle who says, "You fought with your mother-in-law!" The woman denies having done so, the oracle insists that it happened, and then she remembers. "Oh yes, that's right . . . we *did* have a quarrel once . . ." This is precisely what happened in the following case, as reported by the guru Surendra from Gair Sain.

The Forgotten Curse

> This is the true story of Parvati Devi, wife of X of village X, district Chamoli. She had been married for about eleven years, and had given birth to at least six children, but not a single one of them survived. She performed *chhal puja* (see below, "Exorcizing the Crafty Demons") many times, she worshiped her household gods and goddesses regularly, she saw a doctor, but no disease was diagnosed. Then they consulted an oracle, and it emerged that it was not only a divine curse [*dev dosh*], but that it was the *devta* of their own house! But even when they worshiped him, they got no relief. So they

consulted many oracles, and it emerged that the *devta* was Samin—the Samin of her natal village.[8] That girl was from our village, and her marital home is nearby, and so we had heard about it already by the time they came to me to do invoke Samin *Devta*.

I invoked him[9] myself, and he blessed them with a son. But as soon as the son was born, his mother's health got very bad. Her husband was working in Delhi then, and he was not at home. Only her father-in-law and her mother-in-law were there. Other than that, there was no one to help her with her work. As soon as her son was born, she got so serious that she gave up bread and water for a month, and people looked after her baby boy by giving him milk from their own cows. They had her examined in big hospitals, but her health kept deteriorating, day by day. All the work that she had done until now—the cows, the buffaloes, and everything else—it all stopped. So the villagers began to help. In those days there was a good feeling between her and her mother-in-law. But earlier, their relationship had been conflicted [*takrar*]. About one year after the wedding, they had some kind of disagreement, because of which there had been constant fighting and quarrelling in the house.

The baby boy died after exactly one and a half months, and the mother's health was also in great danger. They were looking after her, and at that time I went to ask about her illness along with some other people from her natal village. They promised that they would consult an oracle somewhere far from her home, because the doctor had said that there was no disease [*bimari*]. She was drying up from day to day, and her memory was also going. She didn't even recognize anyone. She passed at least three months in this state, and didn't improve. They tried lots of remedies, and in the end they visited me, and it clearly emerged that because of the mutual mistrust between her and her mother-in-law nine years previously, and because of the fighting and quarrelling within the family, her mother-in-law had gone despondently to the shrine of her Bhairav and placed a curse [*ghat*], but until this day the curse had never emerged in the *thali* of any oracle. Later they were reconciled. She had forgotten the curse that she had placed, because she had placed it in the heat of rage.

All of this is emerged in my platter, and the god said, "Take my rice-grains immediately, and get relief!" As soon as I placed the rice grains on her head, her eyes opened, even though they had been closed for three months. And slowly, she began to eat and drink once

more. Then the curse between them was exorcised / worshiped [*ghat puji gayi*], and now that girl is completely healthy. Although she is pregnant again, she has not been able to get over her deep sorrow over the death of her child. I pray to God that the future will be good to her, and that whatever child she has will have a long life.

Oracular consultations often involve forgotten quarrels and curses, memories of which are stirred when the oracle "sees" history in the landscape. One of my clearest examples comes from a Brahman oracle named Mahanand. Although he lived some distance away from Nauti, he had quite a good reputation, so one fine day in the autumn of 2004 I hired a taxi and went to visit him. My Harijan friends heard that I was going, and several of them asked if they could join me, so that by the time I left, I had ten additional passengers in the taxi, including some Muslims from a nearby hamlet and Hayat Singh, the Rajput caretaker of the Government Tourist Bungalow where I was staying. We reached a mountain pass and stopped for a brief picnic, then descended through the forested slopes of upper Pauri District, down to Mahanand's village. We found him quickly, sat down in his shrine room, and soon he was in trance. He spoke very calmly in standard Hindi, unlike the more frenzied possession of the low-caste oracles (Sax 2004), and he used the standard technique of tossing rice grains into the air, catching them, and "reading" their pattern on his outstretched palms. He also used some other techniques I had not seen before. For example, he had an old silver coin, which he called a *jantra*, that he would occasionally smell in order to gain information; at other times he would toss this *jantra* against a small white stone, which he called a *sasved*, and when it struck the stone, it meant that whatever he had just said was correct, or that it would come true. Speaking about these techniques when I interviewed him after the session, he said, "Sahab, it's a powerful device [*siddhi ka jantra*], a silver coin. And this white stone is just a rock. When I smell this silver *jantra*, then you should think of it as a telephone. I smell it and ask God, 'Hey Prabhu, what is this thing there? Is it a house, or what?' And through god's power, it works."

I asked him if he actually saw things in the rice grains on his palms, and he answered, "Yes, it's a picture [*chitra*], just like the video you are making. When I sit here and do a consultation then I go into meditation [*dhyan*]. That is, my meditation goes to that person [whose question I am answering]. Now I've meditated on his house. As if in a picture, I see what kind of house he has. It comes in my mind. A picture." The first person to make an inquiry was one of my Muslim companions. Here is a transcription of his exchange with Mahanand:

ORACLE: How far is the shrine in the southern direction? There is a meeting of two roads behind your house.

CLIENT: Yes, that's right, there are two roads.

ORACLE: Did you buy some land up above?

CLIENT: No, I didn't.

ORACLE: You own them both yourselves. The place is OK. It's OK. Take the rupee . . . did you build a verandah on the bottom story?

CLIENT: Well . . .

ORACLE [smells the rupee]: . . . are you making four rooms?

CLIENT: Three rooms.

ORACLE: Kitchen?

CLIENT: It's a three-room set, no kitchen.

ORACLE: But there should be four, there should be a kitchen. It's a place for four rooms; you will make a fourth room . . . [He tosses the *yantra* but it doesn't strike the stone]. It's a place for four rooms. The place is OK. No fault [*dosh*] in the soil [*mitti*]. [He smells the rupee.] How far is the bazaar?

CLIENT: It's about a half-kilometer walk.

ORACLE: One, two, three . . . Who has three children?

CLIENT: [thinks a moment . . .] Sir, no one has three children.

ORACLE: Why not? Who has two girls and one boy?

CLIENT: My brother has four children.

ORACLE: That's what I'm saying—three boys and one girl.

CLIENT: He has two girls and two boys.

ORACLE: Give me the rupee. Why isn't it coming right today? Give me the rupee—give it to me. . . . The soil is OK, brother, there's been no harmful deed [*doshkarya*] there.

CLIENT: What's happening with our mutual relations and quarrels?

ORACLE: I'm looking, there's no need to speak. When I'm speaking you may stop me, not otherwise. There's some malevolence [*hay*] in this place, some bad feeling . . . Human malevolence. They are trying to ruin this place; someone from outside. The place is very good, there is a big field behind it, there is water below it, the place is very good. One road goes from the side of the field—how far is the wild cherry tree?

CLIENT: There is a wild cherry tree in front.

ORACLE: Yes it's OK, there is a holy place [*devasthan*], it's a bit far but it also protects you. [He recites a mantra:) "*Nari vicitrae . . .*" You are having

a fight in your family. "*Nari vicitrae* . . ." It's not a matter of the *devta*s; it is something else. The earth is good, it's very good, son. Where is the rupee? Bring it. Give it to me just as it fell [with the same side up]. If you'd brought me some soil, I could tell you more. Which room is bigger, the one on the side, or the other one? . . . Which woman at home is having difficulties?

[At this point the caretaker interrupts:]

CLIENT: Sir, my wife sometimes has problems.

ORACLE: Bring it, bring the rupee! Bring the *jantra*, I will do the consultation with the *jantra*. When someone else's consultation is happening, you should not interrupt. Don't attack another's consultation. [He tosses the rupee.] It's telling me there is trouble with a woman. Is there a ruined building to the left of the house?

[The caretaker answers:]

CARETAKER: No, there's no ruined building.

ORACLE: It's telling me that there is one!

CARETAKER: No, there's none.

ORACLE: Remember, remember! There is one, on the left side. Remember—there was an old house, this is an earlier house, this happened much earlier. You've made a house on this place, but whose is the barren [*auti*] place? Who was barren? Who was it? Your father's mother? Your father's sister? Bring the rupee! Who was twice married? Where is [the local *devta*] Nirankar? . . . Tell me, do you have a family deity? Or do you only worship Dondiya?

CARETAKER: I don't worship anyone.

ORACLE: Why not? Are you a Christian? Bring me the rupee! You are a Hindu, but you say you worship no gods.

CARETAKER: I've just come along for the ride.

Later Mahanand does the consultation of another Muslim client:

ORACLE: Your place is not pure. It's very bad. What am I calling the "place"? The house. I saw a single house. Tell me—is it a single house?

CLIENT: What do you mean, is it single?

ORACLE: Come on, it's single! What do you call single? It's a smaller house, unlike mine, which is double because it has a verandah as well as rooms at the back. Its left corner has dissolved. What am I saying? I am

doing a consultation, so listen attentively! It has been bewitched! I guarantee you, there is a crack in it! There is a pear tree in front of it.
I am saying an apple tree, a pear tree—count them! There is a pear tree in front of it, and in back there is a crack on the left side, and there is black magic in the crack. Get rid of it, or no one will remain well. You have already lost three animals. I said three animals, young man! Who is dead? And then, young man, I said that a man has died. And a young woman has died. No one is at peace in this family, nor can they be! I told you there is witchcraft in this crack. Take it out, or no one will be spared! Hand me the rupee, just as it landed. No need to talk too much, just hand it to me politely. Who was Gabaru Lal? Why haven't you worshiped his *devta*? You have something of his—what is it? And who was Kesar Singh, who was Kesar Lal?

CLIENT: I don't know.

Later, while doing the consultation of another man, Mahanand began singing a Sanskrit hymn, then stopped and asked,

ORACLE: Do you have a four-room house? Do you know what you call a four-room house? Two below, two above. This is what you call it—is there one? What? Is it your ancestral home? I said it's an old house—a ruined house. Where did you put the *devta*, the family god of your house?

CLIENT: He's in the same room he always was.

ORACLE: Inside the house? I'm telling you, the temple is next to the house, in front of it. Look [at the rice grains in my hand]—here is the house, here is the temple. And here is the road. And here is a tree. It's a fruit tree. It's a witness; I mean, it purified you, otherwise your house was on a very filthy place. Ya! The house is speaking! What will happen? Watch out for this house! Or will you not?

CLIENT: Of course we will!

ORACLE: Look, the path is emerging, I'm telling you!

CLIENT: Yes please, go ahead and tell.

ORACLE [smells the rupee]: Is its left side split? Tell me. I'm saying it's the left side. Ya! It's telling the path of one, two, three places. Where have you been sleeping until now? Your house is not pure, my friend! This house's left corner is split—there is witchcraft somewhere in it.
I said it was the left corner. What will happen? Take it out! I am explaining it to you. OK? This woman had some trouble, why didn't you worship

the Masan?[10] Pain in the body, pain in hands and feet. It's telling me, "Pain in the whole body."

Client: Yes, that's true.

Oracle: Pain in the hands and feet, pain in the body. Tell me! It's her natal village, it's at the boundary of two villages.

Client: Yes.

Oracle: There is a cremation ground there.

Client: Yes.

Oracle: You have to worship there.

Client: Yes.

Mahanand himself admitted that his oracular vision wasn't functioning very well that day, but whatever the case may have been, notions of place and landscape were clearly central to the consultation, and this was true of every oracle I met. Such consultations nearly always involve a kind of "ritual prescription," telling the client what he or she must do to alleviate the affliction. Often, this prescription involves establishing a shrine for the afflicting deity.

Establishing a Shrine

Many healing rituals have an important "platial" dimension, for example those involved with magical aggression or sorcery—cursing enemies, defending oneself from curses, "sending back" the curse so that it rebounds on the aggressor, and so forth. The rituals of cursing involve locating and removing dangerous objects and beings, as well as opening, closing, or blocking various paths to or from an enemy. Precisely how an aggressive *devta* is relocated or sent back depends on his or her characteristics. The Muslim spirit Sayyid has no shrines, and so he is simply taken into the forest. The *eri* and *acchari* are malevolent female sprites that reside in the forest and/or at high elevations, and their exorcism involves returning them to these locations in miniature bridal palanquins.[11] Family ghosts are normally placed in a silver image, which is later immersed in the Ganges River or taken to Badrinath, though sometimes it may be buried in an inauspicious place as a kind of punishment (see chapter 5, "The Man Whose Land Was Eaten"). In none of these cases is a shrine erected. After all, the purpose is to remove the afflicting deity, not to encourage it to stay.

In this section, however, I want to focus on a ritual that does establish a *devta*'s shrine, or renews the shrine's energy after it has already been established.

This ritual is called *than ki puja*, that is, the ritual (*puja*) to establish the *devta*'s shrine, his "place" (*than*),[12] and it tells us much about local ideas concerning landscape and history. Shrines are typically erected in order to mitigate a *devta*'s affliction, or as a kind of thanksgiving for a blessing or favor. Virtually every house has a *than* for the lineage deity, although these are often rather small. As the guru Jagdish explained, shrine rituals are often done even when no one remembers the identity of an ancestral *devta*. They have forgotten, but the oracle helps them to remember. Every *than* has a guru, with exclusive rights to conduct worship there because he or his predecessor built it. After the oracle tells the client that he or she must conduct a shrine ritual, the client must locate the guru and find out what to do next. What must be purchased? What has to be collected? Will there be animal sacrifice? Should the shrine be inside or outside? The shrines of peaceful *devta*s are usually inside the house, while shrines of the more dangerous *devta*s are outdoors. The ritual has a number of steps that are explicitly concerned with place: (1) driving away negative energies and purifying the place; (2) constructing the *than*; (3) summoning the *devta* by means of mantras and offerings; (4) installing the *devta* in the *than*; and (5) closing the paths to and from it, so that he cannot leave. It should be noted that steps 3 and 5 are intrinsically ambivalent. In step 3, the *devta* is summoned and praised, but if he is reluctant to reside in the *than* he may be threatened or ritually compelled to do so. In step 5, the *devta*'s exit from the *than* is effectively blocked, imprisoning him there.[13]

The first step involves driving away negative energies and purifying the area where the shrine is to be constructed. This is done by means of the *kas* ritual (*kas puja*), which is a subritual, a part of nearly all the longer rituals described in this book. It is a kind of collective vow by the family to complete the longer ritual in which it is embedded (in this case the *than ki puja,* the ritual of establishing the shrine), and thus, in effect, a local form of the *samkalpa* ritual familiar to students of classical Hinduism, which is also a vow to complete a ritual.[14] One guru told me that the purpose of the *kas puja* is to draw out the *devta*, who cannot speak until it is completed. The etymology of the term *kas* is uncertain, though most informants related it to the word *kashth*, which means "trouble" or "difficulty." It has a number of steps, as follows.

Kas puja

First of all, two representations are made of the *devta* who is to be summoned—a *yantra* and a *dikara*. The *yantra* is an abstract geometrical representation, drawn by the guru with colored powder on a torn workbasket fragment, called

a *changtira* (figure 3.1). This *yantra* will later be covered with various foods that appear over and over in local rituals, and therefore also in this book. These foods include a sweet bread that is made from 1.25 *ser*[15] of flour mixed with jaggery and cooked on one side only (the *ikadya rot*), the seven-grain mixture (*satanaja*),[16] 1.25 kilos of mixed rice and black gram (*khichadi*), a type of gourd (*bhujela*), and a certain local tuber (*ginjar*). Aside from the bread, none of these foods is cooked, which is typical of food-offerings for fierce and dangerous beings, who lack refinement and therefore prefer raw foods. Money, incense sticks, and an oil lamp fashioned from dough are also placed on the *changtira* (figure 3.2). A second representation of the deity (in addition to the *yantra*) is the *dikara*, a small effigy molded of barley-flour dough and often distinguished by a prominent tongue with which it laps up the blood of the animals sacrificed to it (figure 3.3). This image is also called Masan, "the Lord of the Cremation Ground."[17] Before the guru fashions it, he collects hair and nail clippings from all family members and mixes them into the dough, thus incorporating their substance into the image. The *yantra* and the *dikara* are placed next to each other in the middle of the ritual space, and are central objects in the ritual that follows.

Next the family is literally bound together with a rope called a *jiuda*, made from the fibers of the tall *selu* plant.[18] Every member of the family, from the

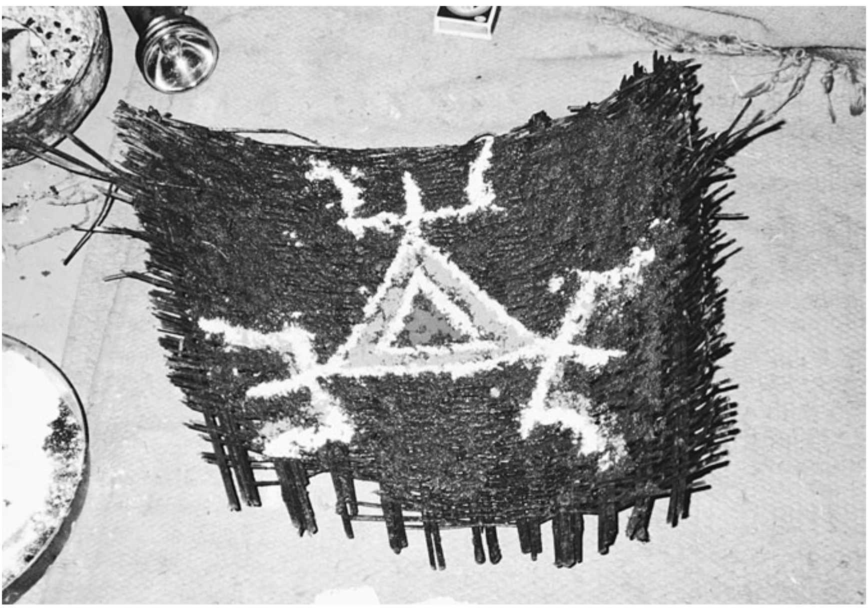


FIGURE 3.1. A *yantra* drawn on the *changtira* (photo by William S. Sax).

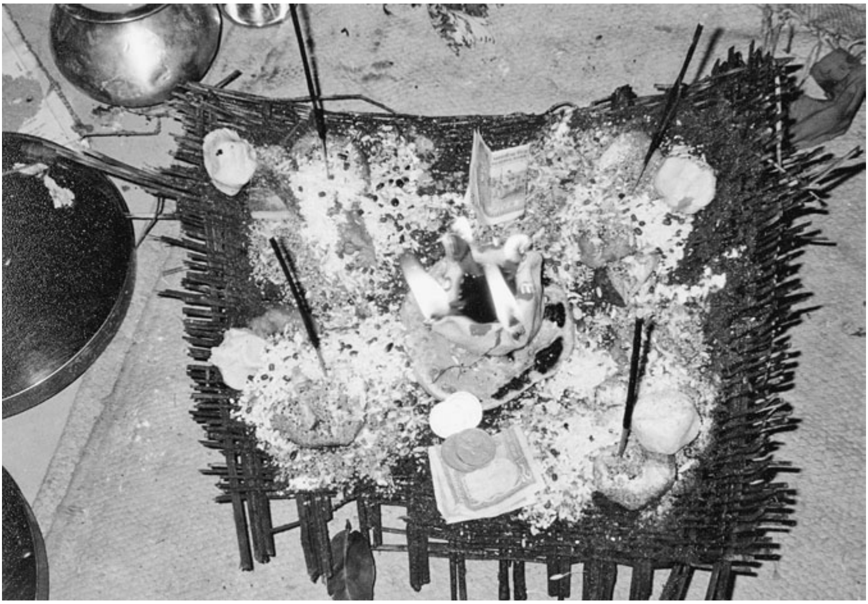


FIGURE 3.2. A *changtira* covered with food offerings, money, incense-sticks, and an oil lamp fashioned from dough (photo by William S. Sax).

oldest invalid to the youngest infant, is encircled by it, and each of them also takes a leaf or a bit of grass between their teeth. This is meant to signify that they are "like cows"—gentle, docile, and of course sacred—so that the angry *devta*s about to be invoked will not harm them. A few outsiders, mostly male neighbors, must also be present. They are called the *panch*, "the five" (witnesses), a concept that resonates with other ideas that are widespread in north India. It is said that when five men gather together, god is present, so that their collective judgment is divinely inspired. This is the idea behind *Panch Parameshvar* or "The Five Gods," perhaps the most famous short story by the renowned Hindi author Munshi Premchand. It also partly explains why village councils in north India are called *panchayats*, or "councils of five." But what, exactly, is it that "the five" witness in the *kas puja*? They witness the truth and integrity of the ritual, that it is not a form of magical aggression or sorcery, and that the family is indeed united. "The five" place torn leaves of two sacred plants, the mango and the *pipal*, on family members' heads, for which they receive one rupee as their "wages" (*mazduri*). These plants also "witness" the ritual.

Now the guru shapes small oil lamps from wheat dough and lights them. Each family member is marked on the forehead with *pithaim* powder, and the guru recites mantras while the family tosses rice grains, flower petals, or other items into the burning lamps. Here the *kas puja* resembles the fire sacrifice



FIGURE 3.3. A *dikara* (photo by William S. Sax).

that is part of a conventional *samkalpa* ritual in this region, and indeed, learned Brahman gurus like Jagdish sometimes do integrate a canonical *samkalpa* here, which specifies the precise time and place of the ritual, along with the astrological sign, lineage, and *gotra*[19] of the senior male. Priests of all castes recite mantras at this point, sometimes in Sanskrit but more often in local dialect mixed with Sanskrit forms. The *ukhel* mantras are essential. According to most gurus, the word *ukhel* means something like "cause to arise/play," although one guru did tell me that it meant "to excavate." Just as the earlier part of the *kas puja* resembles a classical *samkalpa*, so the *ukhel* mantras resembled the *kavach* mantras that are recited by orthodox Hindus as part of their daily worship. The *ukhel* mantras name various parts of the body, each of which is associated with a particular deity. The deities are "invoked" or "awakened" so that they will protect the bodies of the participants from all manner of negative influences, diseases, poisons and the like which effect the body parts. These negative influences are called "weapons" or "arrows" (*ban*), and in the more extensive versions of the *ukhel* mantras, each of the twelve astrological houses (*rashi*) and the twenty-eight astrological conjunctions (*nakshatra*) are also "awakened." They are commanded to protect the participants from such threatening beings and forces as thorny plants and nails, the poison of a black snake, the arrow made of buffalo bones, the arrow made of mouse bones, the arrow made of wooden bones, the arrow made of the bones of a twelve-year-old virgin, whatever comes from the east, from the west, from the north, from the south, from the head of the hawk, from the green grass growing next to the river, from the forty-six whisperers, and so on. Each guru has his own list of negative objects to be removed. Some of these lists are very long, and their internal logic is sometimes

difficult to discern. The various gods inhabiting the parts of the body, and especially Bhairav, are asked to remove these negative things from the participants' flesh, from their bones, from their veins. The guru threatens them with the vengeance of Shiva and Parvati, should they fail to protect the participants.

Once these mantras are finished, a chicken is offered to the *devta*. Here the procedure parallels the sacrifice of a sheep or goat sacrifice. It would be a sin to sacrifice an animal against its will, and so the victim must indicate that it accepts being sacrificed. It does so by quivering or shaking—a sheep or goat must shake the fatty tissue lying between the front shoulders, while a chicken must ruffle its feathers. Most gurus claim to have mantras that induce the animal to shake, and in any case the onlookers usually try to speed the process along by sprinkling water on the animals' backs, or even (in the case of larger animals) filling their ears with grain and pouring water into them. But sometimes the animal just doesn't "take it," and I have often had to wait some time—up to an hour or even more—while participants attempted to make the animal accept the sacrifice. On such occasions the ritual comes to a halt; it cannot proceed until the animal agrees to be sacrificed.

Once that has happened, the chicken is picked up along with the torn workbasket strips on which the mantras, foods, and still-burning lamps are piled, and taken to a small sacrificial pit dug in the earth next to the *auda* stone, a flat, upright stone marking the boundary between the family's land and that of its neighbors. Here the "platial" dimension of the ritual is most apparent. The guru Darpal told me that the ritual had to be done at the border of two men's property, "in front of the *panch*. The *devta*'s decision [*phaisla*] is made in front of the *panch*. . . . Someone has fought, someone has wept—all of this is left behind at the *auda* stone." This is highly significant. The ritual concerns the family, indeed it ritually establishes the unity of the family (see chapter 5). But as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, persons in Garhwal are partly constituted by the land on which they live, therefore the family would be "incomplete" if its land were not included. By conducting the *kas puja* at the border of the family's land, the object of ritual therapy is defined as family-plus-land. The *kas puja* is often part of a ritual of reconciliation within the family, and perhaps this explains why Darpal called this the "place of decision" and "the place of reconciliation." Certainly it helps to explain why "the five" witnesses must be there.

Now the torn workbasket with the puja materials and the burning lamps is tossed in the pit. The *auda* stone is washed with milk and water, in order to purify it. Incense is offered to the stone and to the pit. The chicken's head is twisted or cut off, and its blood poured into the pit. Both of its feet are cut off and left there, too. In all these respects, the sacrifice at the *auda* stone paral-

lels the animal sacrifice that is the culmination of the *than ki puja* as a whole (see below). The pit is filled with earth and the guru pours water around it three times in a circle, so that none of the beings there can escape. Then "the five" cook the chicken and eat it. Family members do not share in this sacrificial meal. Here the logic of the ritual seems to be that he negative feelings/emotions/energies of family discord are transferred to the sacrificial animal and through it, to male friends and neighbors.[20]

The *kas puja* is normally followed by the "dancing" of the *devta*s. The guru summons them by singing their songs, and they possess their human vehicles or "beasts," and dance. These sessions of music and dancing can be very dramatic and exciting, and I have tried to convey something of their atmosphere at several places in this book. It is this dancing more than anything else that draws a crowd (not only for the *kas puja,* but for all such public rituals), and this is reflected in colloquial speech, where one does not speak of "attending a ritual," but rather says, "Let's go see the *devta*s dance," or "The gods are dancing in such-and-such a village." Not only do the *devta*s dance, but they also speak, and during this part of the ritual much negotiation with them takes place. Often the negotiation has to do with the shrine—the *devta* demands that a shrine be established, or says that he is happy (or unhappy) with his current one. Such negotiations are sometimes very prolonged, with tears and weeping, begging and threatening, on both sides. But in any case the implication is clear—the *devta* does not simply "live" in an abstract sense, he lives somewhere, he needs a particular *place* to live, just like other family members.

Sessions of music and dancing may go on for days, with performances in the afternoon and again at night, and all of this culminates with the ritual of "establishing of the shrine" (*than thapna*). The construction of the *than* illustrates once again the idea of shared substance between place and person, in this case the senior male who is the sponsor (*jajman*) of the ritual. The guru Jagdish described the procedure to me: First, one measures a string (*nala/taga*) to be worn on the wrist of the senior male, two and a half times the length of his forearm, from elbow to fingertip. Then one locates a suitable place for the shrine—it should be south of the client's house, and open toward the east. It should be made in a place where it will bother neither the family nor other villagers. The shrine's foundation is now measured with the *taga*-string. It must be perfectly square, otherwise the whole shrine will be ruined. It should be made of red earth, and concrete must not be used, because the sand with which it is mixed comes from nearby riverbanks, and may have come in contact with corpses or other impure things (burning grounds are often on riverbanks, and people often relieve themselves there). Seven kinds of soil are used to construct the shrine, namely soil that has been in contact with an elephant, a lion, a

rhinoceros, a king, a chariot, a monastery, and a prostitute, along with soil from the high-altitude village of Malari.[21] Jagdish assured me that he actually does make use of these various kinds of soil, which he collects in different places or purchases in Delhi, and he even showed me the small bags he keeps them in. Other items used to purify and empower the shrine include Ganges water; the leaves of the mango and the *pipal* tree; the "seven medicines" of mango-wood, *pipal*-wood, *bar*-wood, mango leaves, *dhak*-tree leaves, *tulasi* leaves, and *duba* grass; the "seven heroes" (*bir*), which are actually seven roots that Jagdish recognizes and gathers in Chamoli district; saffron; sesame and mustard seeds; cow-dung ash; earth from a mouse-hole; water from seven sources; a few small, empty, womb-shaped earthen pots (*kori kamoli*); the "eight metals" (*ashtadhatu*—the classical list is gold, silver, copper, zinc, lead, tin, iron and mercury, but Jagdish listed gold, silver, copper, brass, iron, aluminum and lead); four nails made from these eight metals; and a copper coin with a hole in the middle. Some of these items are put in the empty round earthen pots, which are buried inside the shrine below the place where the image of the *devta* will be established. Others are mixed with earth to make the walls of the shrine.

A coconut is cracked and offered as a symbolic animal sacrifice, the *devta* is summoned with mantras and bathed with pure water "from seven sources," with Ganges water, honey, sugar, and with the five auspicious products of the cow (*pancamrit*): milk, yogurt, clarified butter, cow's urine, and cow-dung. After that sandalwood, rice, lit lamps, incense, and *naivedya* (a cooked sweet made of flour, jaggery, and water) are offered to the *devta*. Then the guru performs a fire sacrifice in which barley grains and sesame seeds[22] are offered, along with clarified butter, honey, and sugar. Now the *devta* is invited by means of various mantras (which summarize his history) to inhabit his "sign" (*nisan*). This "sign" is never iconic, but usually consists of a trident, firetongs, *phavadi*, or one of the other signs of Bhairav (see chapter 2). An *upanayana* (sacred thread ritual) is performed for the *devtas* Narsingh, Bhairav, Goril and Nath-Siddhva, but "low-caste *devtas*" like Kachya, Dondiya, and Chaurangya are simply "awakened" by means of the *ukhel* mantras. The guru then makes a "pure bread" (*shuddh roti*) with clarified butter, and offers it to Kali in the southern direction along with rice and lentils, mustard and sesame seeds, clarified butter, and a lit lamp with red powder on it. This is done in order to stop Kali and her malevolent companions from coming and disturbing the ritual. Finally there is a "reading" (*path*) from the scriptures, describing Narsingh and Bhairav, and listing all their famous holy places, their weapons, and other things associated with them.

Here I must make a slight excursus to comment on the local importance of the god Narasimha, usually called Narsingh in Garhwal. In the Sanskrit tradition, Narasimha, "the man-lion," is one of the ten *avatara* or "descents" of the

god Vishnu. He is a particularly violent one, since his main myth culminates with his ripping open the chest of a demonic king. He is also one of the most popular deities in Chamoli District, and the antiquity of his cult is suggested by the fact that his most famous temple is found in Joshimath, the ninth-century capital of the Katyuri kings, which has been an important local religious centre for well over a thousand years (Nautiyal 1969). Narsingh is particularly associated with local Rajputs, for many of whom he is the lineage deity. I have been told that some local Rajput clans even have their own version of the *gayatri* mantra (recited every day by pious Hindus) in which Narsingh is prominent, though I doubt this is true. In Chamoli District, he has two main forms, the vegetarian or "milk-drinking" form (*dudhadari*) and the "blood-drinking" form (*raktadari*) that accepts animal sacrifice. Narsingh often appears together with Bhairav in the same *than*, in which case they are always referred to jointly, as "Narsingh/Bhairav." When Narsingh is present in his "milk-drinking" form, he is separated from Bhairav by a wall (see figure 3.4), and during the animal sacrifice a curtain is placed in front of his portion of the *than* so that he cannot see it.

Shifting the *than*

The preceding is a rather abstract description of an ideal *than ki puja* according to the Brahman guru Jagdish. I accompanied him and observed as he performed two such rituals, which broadly (though not precisely) conformed to his description. One of these was for a Harijan family living in a rather remote location, which had experienced ghostly visitors at night and wanted their shrine to be renewed for their own protection. (In this case the ritual was an "empowering" of an already-constructed shrine, so it followed the above description minus the actual construction of the *than*). In another case the shrine had been improperly built. Concrete had been used for the walls and even the floor, which prevented the images from being stuck in the ground, as required. Moreover, the shrine had been built beneath a footpath, so that people occasionally insulted the *devta* by "treading on his head," and for this reason, too, the shrine had to be relocated.

I was able to record a third shrine ritual on video and make extensive notes regarding it. This was the family shrine of Darpal (figure 3.5), who on this occasion acted as the client (*jajman*) rather than the guru. Darpal and his family had abandoned their old house several years previously and built a new one at the edge of the village, and he felt that it was time to shift his ancestral shrine from the old house to the new one. After conducting the *kas puja* on

the first day and “making the *devta*s dance” that evening and on the following afternoon, he performed the shrine ritual on the second night. He and his son Sacchu went to the old shrine at their previous house, accompanied by the Guru Soniya and his son, and also of course by the ethnographer with his video camera. The old shrine was collapsing, and when we excavated it, we saw that the staff of timaru-wood had taken root and grown into a tree, so that it was not possible to move it along with the other objects. Guru Soniya lit a lamp and put red powder on a trident from the old shrine, while Darpal collected stones

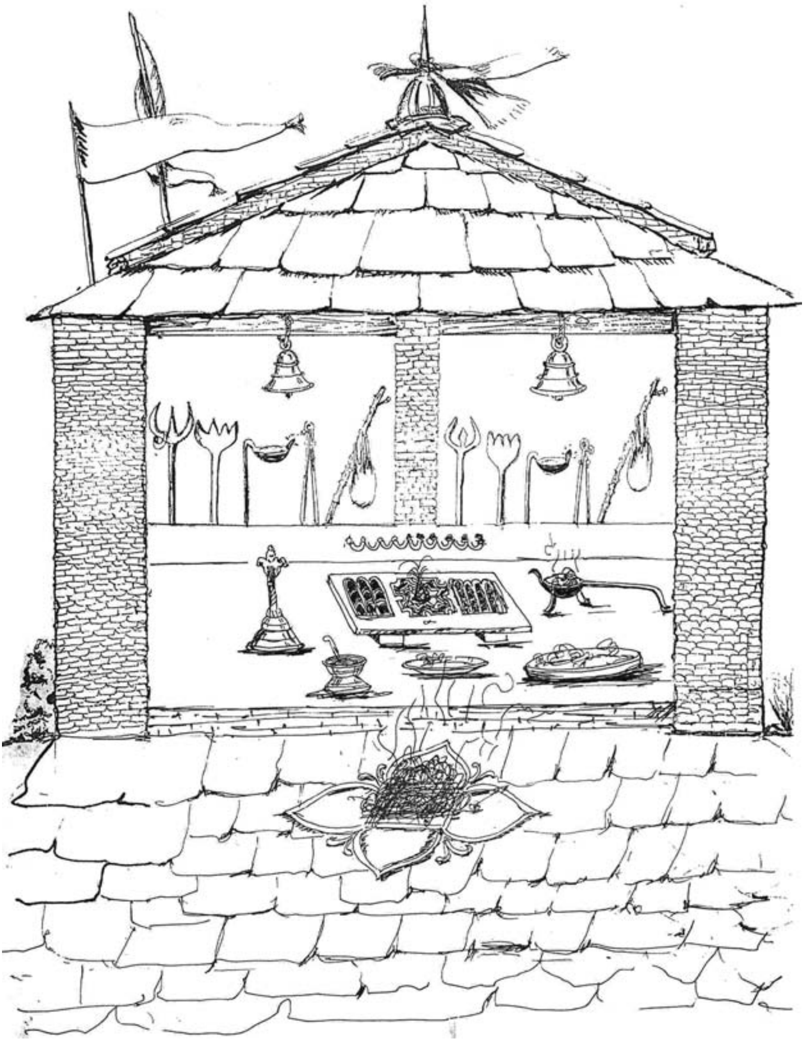


FIGURE 3.4. Artist’s conception of the *than* in Dhanpur (drawing by Prem Mohan Dobhal).

from the old pit. He recited a mantra to awaken the god, and offered him a coconut, an *ikadya ront* (sweet bread cooked on one side only), a lit lamp, and a red earthen pot. By means of further mantras, Bhairav was transferred to the lit lamp, then two more lamps were lit, and Narsingh was transferred to one of them, his fierce underlings (*bahiyal*s; see below) to the other. Soil was gathered from the old sacrificial pit, and everything was placed in a basket and carried to the new shrine. Just before we left, a chicken was sacrificed in the old shrine, and its blood, head, and two feet were left there. Guru Soniya tore a round cooked bread into pieces and left them behind, but he kept a coin that had been offered.

We carried the basket with the burning wicks up to the new *than* behind Darpal's house, removed the *devta*'s signs from it and placed them inside the *than*. Now the various *devta*s—Kachiya, Bhairav, Narsingh, and Devi—were together in one "room," with no wall separating them. The earth that had been gathered below at the old shrine was mixed into the sacrificial pit, and in the *than* next to it were placed some cooked breads, cooked sweet pudding, and a bell. Then began the culmination of the ritual, the animal sacrifice to Bhairav and his *bahiyal*s, ferocious beings who serve him. It is actually they who live in the sacrificial pit, and who perform violent acts of justice and revenge at Bhairav's command. They are unnamed, and have no iconography, but they correspond in a general way to the beings mentioned in the story of the girls



FIGURE 3.5. Artist's conception of Darpal's *than* (drawing by Prem Mohan Dobhal).

Umeda and Sumeda, the "foundation myth" of the cult (see chapter 2). Recall that in that story, the girls' father and uncle took revenge on the high-caste Myurs who had persecuted them by bringing the *lal handi*—the red clay pot—back from Tibet and opening it in the Myurs' village. According to the myth, this pot was filled with "forty-two heroes [*vir*], fifty-two ghouls [*bahiyal*], eighty-four fierce goddesses [*kali*], sixty-four witches [*jogini*], and ninety man-lions [*narsingh*]." In the shrine ritual, Guru Sonya first made the *bahiyal yantra* at the bottom of the pit, on top of the earth from the old shrine, then daubed the clay pot with red powder and put it into the pit. Inside and next to the pot, he placed the so-called eighty-four thorns (*kanta*), including the *ikadya ront*, a piece of *ginjar* root, a *bhujela* gourd, a bunch of stinging nettles, some *phana* (ground *gait* lentils), the seven-grain mixture, one small fried bread (*puri*), water from seven sources, a small fish (*gadyala*), a crab (*gegada*), a piece of driftwood, and a mixture of rice and black gram (*khichadi*). (Elsewhere I have seen spiders, worms, and crawdads placed in the *handi* or in the pit.) Next he made a *yantra* with colored powder on the top of the half-cooked bread, put it on the mouth of the pot in the pit, and placed a rock on top of it.[23]

Meanwhile Darpal, acting now as guru rather than as client, wrapped the *than* with the *nala* thread, and then both gurus opened their ritual manuals and began to chant mantras, Soniya for the pit and Darpal for the *than*. The purpose was to ensure that the *bahiyal*s went into their pit, and Bhairav, Narsingh, and the others into their *than*. A chicken was sacrificed in the pit, and then two goats were sacrificed, one for the *than* and one for the pit. After the goats' heads were cut off, their bodies were held over the pit so that their blood would drain into it, then their feet were cut off and placed there, too. Oil-soaked wicks were lit on the goats' heads and quickly extinguished—some say this is to speed their souls' way to their next birth, others that this brief ritual expunges the guru's sin in killing an animal. The animals were gutted, and portions of the feces-filled intestine were also placed in the pit. The gurus put *pithaim* on each other's foreheads and on those of the other participants, and the pit was filled with earth and covered with a rock. A magic circle was made around its edge with Ganges water and mantras, to prevent the *bahiyal*s from escaping. We left the lamps burning in the shrine, and then went to butcher and cook the animals. The *than* was now "established" (*thapa*).

One striking aspect of this ritual is the way it constitutes the sacrificial pit as a place of concentrated violence. Goats, chickens, and sometimes sheep or even pigs are sacrificed and their blood poured into the pit. Fish, crabs, spiders, worms, and other creatures are also sacrificed, especially to the dangerous *bahiyal*s accompanying Bhairav. The idea is to attract these fierce beings with the blood of the sacrifice, localize them in the pit, and bind them there, so

that their energies can later be used for the benefit of the client and his family. Clearly, the blood of the sacrificial animal is an inducement to these creatures to reside there, as well as a source of energy for the shrine. Violence is also explicit in the myth of Umeda and Sumeda, which is nothing other than a tale of violent revenge, and also in the numerous anecdotes about those who go to such shrines when they feel they are the victims of injustice. Such people are said to remove the rock cover and weep tears into the pit, calling upon the *devta* to bring them justice and to punish their oppressors. According to popular belief, this is typically done by women, especially low-caste women, who have been abused or mistreated in some way. It is above all such people, the weakest and most powerless people members of the society, who are the beloved of Bhairav, and they are also the main avenue along which the cult spreads.

How the Cult Spreads

The landscape of Chamoli district is full of shrines that have been established through rituals like this. The majority of them are ancestral shrines that are periodically renewed or shifted, as described above. But new ones are also being constantly established. Why do people establish new shrines? How does the cult of Bhairav spread? Here too, a strong "platial" element is involved. As my friend Mahanand Dhondiyal, a Brahman guru from Nauti village, put it, there are three "paths" by which this happens—the path of the curse, the path of the land, and the path of the *dhyani*.

I have already mentioned cursing several times, and will focus on it in chapter 7. In the paradigm case, someone feels that he or she is the victim of injustice and seeks redress through various means, none of which is effective. As a last result they go to the shrine of their village deity, excavate the pit, and call upon the *devta* for justice. This calling upon the god is also a curse (*ghat*), and it takes a stereotypical form: "Oh God, if I am guilty, then strike me dead! But if my enemy is guilty, then see to him/her [*us ko dekho*]! Bring him/her into my shelter [i.e.. make him/her beg me for forgiveness]!" The *devta* afflicts the enemy who, in order to bring the affliction to an end, must establish a shrine. Many people say that this is why so many high-caste homes contain a shrine for the low-caste deity Kachiya. Some ancestor abused a Harijan man (perhaps by failing to pay him fairly) or sexually exploited a Harijan woman, who then called upon Kachiya for justice. The *devta* afflicted the high-caste person, who ultimately had to establish his shrine in their home. A Brahman friend of mine, for example, reported that Kachiya was worshiped in his home because when his great-great-grandfather emigrated to Chamoli from elsewhere, many

dependents came with him, including a low-caste woman. My friend said that his ancestor must have had a love relationship with the woman, because she expected to receive some land from him, but didn't—so she called upon Kachiya, who afflicted the ancestor. He built a shrine to pacify the *devta*, and the family worships Kachiya to this very day.

The second path Mahanand mentioned was the "path of the land" (*dharti ka rasta*). Gods like Bhairav are part of the land where their *than*s are located—they are one with it, they cannot be "evicted." Therefore, when one acquires land from another person, one also acquires the *devta*s resident there, and one must continue to worship them. That is another reason why Kachiya Bhairav, who is so deeply associated with the lower castes, is also sometimes worshiped by the higher castes—not because they chose to worship him or committed some crime, but because they have acquired a piece of land, perhaps from a low-caste person, where his shrine was already located.

The third common path for the spread of the cult is the "path of the *dhyani*" or out-married daughter. The figure of the *dhyani* is very prominent in Garhwali culture, a focal point of both ritual and folklore (Polit 2006; Sax 1990, 1991, 2003). As in most of north India, local social structure is patri-virilocal. This means that when a young woman marries, she leaves the village of her birth (her *mait*), leaves her friends and family, and moves to the home of her husband (her *sauryas*). Traditionally, she took up residence in the home of his extended family—his brothers, their wives and children, and any unmarried sisters, all under the authority of her husband's parents. According to the Sanskrit ritual texts, a new bride's body is literally transformed by the rituals of marriage (see Inden and Nicholas 1977), as well as by her subsequent residence with her husband's family, so that she is no longer part of her natal family and should not, for example, observe birth and death pollution for them, but only for her husband's family and lineage.[24] Therefore, girls are proverbially said to be "guests" in their parents' home, who must one day leave their *mait* and take up residence in their *sauryas*, and this lends great poignancy to the love that a girl's family feels for her, and she for them (Narayan 1986). But despite this hegemonic ideology, numerous songs and rituals from the area show that women do indeed maintain important relationships to their natal families.[25]

A proper wife should modify some of her behavior when she moves to her husband's family. Among other things, she should cease worshiping the gods of her *mait* and begin to worship those of her *sauryas*. But here we encounter a crucial difference among the castes, and one that is deeply connected with the cult of Bhairav and related deities. When one asks upper-caste people why Harijans are so low, they normally list three main reasons. Harijans are low, it is said, because they engage in polluting and low-status occupations, because they for-

merly ate the flesh of the sacrificial buffalo, and because their women bring the gods of their *mait* with them when they move to their *sauryas*. This stereotype is widely held, and the practices associated with the cult of Bhairav confirm it. He is said to be fond of all his village "children" (here the word *dhyan* is often used to indicate "children" of both genders—a *dhyan* is simply the "child of the village," or one who has a kinship relation by virtue of being from the same village), but he is most fond of his *dhyani*s; that is, his out-married daughters, and particularly those from the lowest castes. This is consistent with his identity as a god of justice, because such women are the lowest and most powerless members of the society, not only because of their caste but also because of their gender. Bhairav is called the "protector of the *dhyani*s," he comes to their aid when they call upon him, and sometimes he even accompanies them to their *sauryas*, "hitching a ride" as it were in a favorite piece of jewelry, especially the knot where they tie their hair-braid. When my friend Mahanand, the Brahman guru, told me that one of the most prominent paths for the spread of the cult was the "path of the *dhyani*," he was referring to this complex of ideas.[26]

Do low-caste women really bring their natal *devta*s with them when they shift residence after marriage? Of course they do. Like men and women of all castes, they call upon the *devta* of their *mait* when they are in trouble or danger, and especially if they feel themselves to be victims of injustice. If men or women from any caste think that the god has granted their requests, they will establish a shrine and worship him in their homes. So the question must be reformulated: Are such practices more common among low-caste women than among high-caste women? My impression is that they are, and this would be consistent with the ideas and practices of the cult. Harijan women are indeed more vulnerable than other members of society, so one would expect them to have more frequent occasion to call on the *devta*s of their *mait*s for help. Because of poverty, discrimination, and the related problems of alcoholism, unemployment, and wife abuse, Harijan marriages are less stable than high-caste ones, and low-caste women often flee an intolerable marital situation for the shelter of their *mait* and its *devta*—another practice for which Harijans are looked down on by the higher castes, since it contravenes the idea that a properly married woman belongs in her *sauryas*. These themes are illustrated by the story of Chandri, a Harijan woman about forty years old who was interviewed by Sacchu in 2001.

Chandri's Story

> My father got me married during my childhood. I was about thirteen years old then, and my husband was around twenty-two. Before that,

I had many difficulties—my whole life long I have had nothing but trouble. I never even saw the path to the school! Because of poverty I had to keep working in my home, and when I was twelve years old my father engaged me to a man from the Kohli caste, from village X. I also am a Kohli.

My father died soon after my marriage, and my in-laws tormented me very badly. Once, for example, my husband beat me and left me in my *mait*, along with my children. But he took my youngest son from me, and I was tortured by his memory, and simply stopped eating. Then my brother sued my husband, who was arrested. In the end he agreed to take me back, and promised never to beat me again. He signed an agreement saying so, and took me straight from the court to his home, but after three years he began to beat me again, and told me to go back to my *mait*.

So once again I was suffering, and I said to myself, "Chandri, it is better to die than to put up with this. I will jump in the river or leap from a cliff!" While I was thinking these thoughts, my uncle [*chacha*, father's younger brother] suddenly arrived. He said, "Girl, you are in a very bad way!" He couldn't bear to see my condition, so he called a village meeting [*panchayat*] and said, "Look brothers, this is the kind of son-in-law we have! He already beat her once and left her in her *mait*, and we have a judgment against him from the court, but once again he is torturing her. Now you people should decide—we want justice from your village!" He took me back to my *mait*, but later my husband came secretly and took my four children away. After that I stayed in my *mait* for four years, but my husband didn't come to fetch me . . . but then one day, my *devta* danced.

Our *devta* is the Bhairav of Dobari.[27] He possessed my uncle, who said, "Hey *disha*,[28] be patient! I am with you, and my *botiya* [your children] are in your *sauryas*, and I am with them night and day. On the day you returned to your *mait*, I was with you. And I have given great trouble to their entire family!" Then he wept and wept, and promised me, "My daughter, don't worry uselessly! From today I will live with you. Whenever you have trouble, call upon me, and I will be with you!" Then he gave me rice grains and said, "Go, leave these grains in your place [*sauryas*]." And as soon as I took the grains in my hand, the *devta* came over me too, and I cried out [*thok mar di*], and on the same day the *devta* went to my *sauryas*, and "pressed" my mother-in-law,[29] and the next morning she sent her son to fetch me, but she didn't tell him what had happened to her during the night.

When my husband came to my *mait* to fetch me, he said to my uncle, "Father-in-law,[30] I have made a very great mistake, but from today I will never do such bad things again. Send your daughter with me. I am really in distress [*pareshan*]." My uncle said, "I can't send my daughter back with you! After ten or fifteen days you will begin fighting with her again, and once again she will have trouble." But my husband said, "Oh father-in-law, after today I will never again fight with your daughter!" Then my uncle said, "You and we have already been in court, and if we wanted, we could have had you arrested. But we thought, 'He is related us—he'll understand sooner or later.' But you know what? I think that you are incapable of understanding! I'll think I'll have to take care of you [*thik thak karna*]!"

[But my husband said,] "Father-in-law, I guarantee that after today you won't hear any more complaints about me." Later my uncle explained this all to me, and said "Girl, you must live in your *sauryas*; that is your proper home. 'If you earn in your *mait* it's wasted, but if you earn in your *sauryas*, you'll eat plenty.'[31] Go, girl! Go to your *sauryas*, and look after your children!" So I went straight to my *sauryas* with my husband, and he behaved properly with me for five or six days, but he began to beat me again—and then I found why. One night he got up from where he was sleeping next to me and went straight to his older brother's wife. When he got up, I pretended to sleep, but I watched what he did. He went outside, sat down and smoked a cheroot, then got up and went straight to her door and knocked. I watched as he went inside, and he didn't come out until 3 or 4 o'clock at night. That was the day I found out that he wasn't living properly with me, and why he beat me.

When I confronted him next morning, he beat me again, and told me straight out that he could not leave his brother's wife, that she and he had taken a divine vow.[32] He said, "You stay here, and eat and drink as you like [*aram se*]. I will make sure that you want for nothing." But Guru-ji, that is not possible. For a woman, it is better to die than for her husband to take a second wife. I called on Bhairav, saying, "You are my father! You are my mother! Please protect my honor!" And then my mother-in-law said, "Get rid of this whore!" I said to her, "Mother-in-law, you are an elderly woman! Why are you swearing like this?" Now, the Bhairav of Dobari was in their house too, and he used to possess her. When she tried to throw me out, then the Bhairav from my *mait* came [over me], and said, "Who is the one that is trying to throw me out? I'll take care of her!" Bhairav

came there and possessed me, too! He was ferocious! Then he began to afflict my mother-in-law, and after that my husband's younger brother also became ill. So they all got together—my mother-in-law, my husband's older brother's wife, his younger brother, and my husband—and decided to call a local guru and ask him to get rid of the *devta*. They called Bhadu from Dungaro, and he swore that the *devta* would leave that place. Bhairav is still there in my *sauryas*, but the guru put him back in the pit. It used to be that when he came over me, it was physically pleasant [*sharir khush hota tha*], but now when he possesses me, it's very unpleasant. That's how I know that those people did something or other to the *devta*. And since that day, my husband neither stays with me nor eats with me. He lives in the upper house, and I live in the lower one.

Later my uncle himself summoned the *devta*, and said, "Listen, *devta*, you must live in this house. And if you ever afflict your *dhyani*, then you will suffer endlessly [*lakh lakh ki duvay*, the sin of killing Shiva, the sin of killing a Brahman, the sin of killing a cow! Listen, you! You must stay in this girl's head and in her heart [*ghat pinda*], and you must always keep her child in your lap, until he grows up. On the day he grows up, he will worship you. But until that day, if you do any mischief to this boy, then you will have endless troubles!" My uncle did a very big vow.

One day, my mother-in-law and my husband and his elder brother's wife tried to feed me some "rubbish" [*kabar*; see Chapter 4, "Nilam's Wife"]. But the *devta* possessed me! He grabbed my mother-in-law's head, and said, "Look! You tried to feed some rubbish to my daughter but it didn't work! Look, you! Don't you ever try to do such a thing again, or I will make your whole family dance!" Guru-ji, I've come to you and I want you to do something to my husband, so that he never takes anyone else's name. If he improves and begins to live properly with me, then I will serve you well. I want you to make some ash so that he comes in my power.

SACCHU: So, this *devta* still comes over you?

CHANDRI: Yes, he used to come over me and he also did consultations but now he just comes and doesn't do any consultation.

SACHHU: Why not?

CHANDRI: He doesn't do it because my mother-in-law did something to him, but he still comes over me. Then I weep, but I don't speak. Who

knows? Maybe they stopped his tongue. If there was only someone to help me then I would awaken [*ukhel*] this *devta*, but what can I do? I am in great distress! My children eat, and I eat, only when I work for others.

SACCHU: Why? Doesn't your husband give you food and drink?

CHANDRI: No, no. Until now the people from my *mait* gave it, but I haven't been there for awhile. Now I earn myself, and I make my own clothes and shoes. My little sister lives in Rithola village. Occasionally she helps me. When that bastard beats me, I go to my sister's home and stay there for a day or two, but he doesn't come to fetch me. Then my children cry, and they come to me. That's the way it is with a mother's love. For their sake, I go back to my home.

Unfortunately, Chandri's story of suffering is not unusual for a Harijan woman. Early marriage, physical abuse, and persecution by the mother-in-law are common themes in the life stories of low-caste women her age. But Bhairav, the god of her *mait*, manifested and helped her—by possessing her uncle and promising to protect her, by possessing Chandri herself when she resisted the persecution of her mother-in-law, and by afflicting her mother-in-law. In this way, he illustrated the widespread idea that Bhairav is, above all, the protector of his *dhyani*s. Somewhat unusually, the same Bhairav was worshiped in her *sauryas* as well as her *mait*, but that did not prevent her relatives from summoning a guru and putting Chandri's *devta* back in the pit, so that he could not afflict them anymore.

In summary, one can say that the three paths along which the cult of Bhairav spreads—the path of aggression, the path of the land, and the path of the *dhyani*—illustrate the importance of place and landscape in the cult of Bhairav. The opening and closing of "paths" are central to practices of magical aggression, as will be shown in chapter 7. The path of the land shows that *devta*s are an irrevocable part of the land where they reside, and cannot be "evicted." And the path of the *dhyani* illustrates the complex relationships between kinship, residence, and ritual that are central to cult practices. These relationships are the topic of the final section of this chapter, which has to do with the healing ritual that is performed more frequently than any other in Chamoli district, the *chhal puja*.

Exorcizing the Crafty Demons

The *chhal puja* is the most frequently performed healing ritual in Chamoli. The word *chhal* means "guile, deception, ruse, sham" (Chaturvedi 1974: 222), but in this context, "guile" is personified as a set of demons who afflict people,

especially recently married women. Hence I have translated *chhal* as "crafty demons." Anyone can be afflicted by them, and I have observed *chhal puja*s for unmarried boys and girls, as well as for married women.[33] There is, however, a kind of paradigm affliction that makes up the majority of cases: a female who is "grabbed" by the *chhal* in her *mait*, but shows the symptoms only after her marriage. She consults an oracle and determines the cause of her affliction, then goes to her *mait* along with her husband or one of his male relatives to exorcize them, thus returning them to the place where they originated. This paradigm case tells us a great deal about concepts of gender and landscape, and I will focus on it below (see also Polit 2005 and Sax 1994). But first I should like to provide an inventory of the beings that are involved.

To begin with are the *chhal* proper. According to guru Jagdish, every case of *chhal* involves a Masan, and Masan himself comes in six forms: Sayyid, Pathan, Mongol, Masan, Eri, and Acchari. The Muslim spirit Sayyid will be described below, Pathan is the name of a Afghani tribe, and Mongol refers to Muslim conquerors from Central Asia. Masan is the "Lord of the Cremation Ground," while *eri*s and *acchari*s (Skt. *apsaras*) are malevolent female sprites associated with high places. Thus two of the six types of afflicting beings are female and four are male, while three are Muslims and three are Hindu. In every case, says Jagdish, all of these beings are present when a victim is afflicted. Therefore, there is always a Masan to be worshiped, and that is why the ritual focuses on his image.[34] It involves animal sacrifice, which will be described at length below.

A second common sort of demon is the *chhaya* or *jal-chhaya*. The word *chhaya* means "shade," and has all the negative connotations associated with darkness, but it can also mean something like "blessings," for example when gods and especially goddesses are requested to provide their *chhaya maya*, their "wealth of blessings," to a devotee. In the present context, however, a *chhaya* is simply a malevolent being that causes affliction. For the worship of the *chhaya*, characterized by Jagdish as the "mother" of the demons, small palanquins are fashioned and covered with yellow cloth, then filled with bangles, combs, cosmetics and other "feminine" items, carried into the jungle, and offered to her. Animals are not sacrificed to the *chhaya*, who is offered milk instead, but sometimes a cock is circled over the head of the victim and then released. A *jal-chhaya* is a *chhaya* that lives in the water (*jal*). People are often afflicted by it when they are frightened by a dead body floating by on a river, or by the shock from cold water. The worship of the *jal-chhaya* is similar to that of a *chhaya*, except that its palanquin is taken to a wet, low place, typically a dark riverbank or stream bed (cf. Polit 2006). The *van-devi* or "forest goddess," is almost identical to the *chhaya*: she is returned to the forest in a miniature bamboo palanquin covered with a yellow cloth and is not offered animal sacrifice, but instead a

chick is released at a high place. The only important difference seems to be that her rituals are performed at night, under a fruit tree.

One of the most interesting types of *chhal* is Sayyid, a Muslim. I had always thought that he was a *devta*, but Jagdish insisted that he is a kind of *chhal*. Sayyid always appears dressed in white, with a white turban and a dazzling white smile. He typically afflicts men, especially when they are traveling, and often asks his victim for a cigarette. Afflicted persons sometimes report that after giving him one, they realized that he was following them. "Whenever I stopped for a cup of tea or a cigarette," said one young male victim to me, "I could see him out of the corner of my eye." When Sayyid has "grabbed" someone they must act quickly and worship him on a Friday (the holy day of Muslims), whereas normally one can wait for years to exorcize a *chhal*. In the exorcisms I witnessed, the male victim was dressed like Sayyid, with white clothes and white turban, and held a "Muslim" dagger in his hands during the ritual. Sayyid is a fascinating character whose cult says a great deal about Hindu perceptions of Muslims, and I hope to describe him at length in a later publication. Here it is sufficient to note that in his exorcism ritual, he is offered cigarettes, betel nuts, and alcohol, that a barley-flour *dikara* is made, and that animals are not sacrificed to him. Instead, a white chicken is released in the forest.

Let us return to our paradigm case, a woman who suffers from some kind of affliction, visits one or more oracles, and determines that her affliction has been caused by a *chhal* from her *mait*. It is normally assumed that the *chhal* "became attached" to her (*lag gaya*) while she was working there before marriage. Young women regularly work in the wild places outside the village—the forests, ravines, and mountains where afflicting spirits live. As females, they are thought to be especially open to dangerous, external beings, and as young persons they are considered "raw" (*kachcha*; Polit 2006). Therefore, young women are especially vulnerable to spiritual attack by *chhal* and similar beings, particularly if they experience a fright or a shock of some kind. At this time of maximum vulnerability the young, frightened girl is seized by the *chhal*. Months or even years later she begins to display symptoms, until affliction by a *chhal* is diagnosed. She returns to her *mait* and stays there until the *chhal puja* can be performed, during which time she is not allowed to work. Her husband must pay the costs of the ritual. Local persons insist that nearly all Chamoli women—perhaps 95 percent—have a *chhal puja* performed for them at some time in their lives, and my observations bear this out. Certainly it is true that the gurus are called upon to perform *chhal puja* more than any other type of healing ritual, and it was the ritual I saw most often while conducting research for this book.

So how is *chhal puja* performed? For the following description I rely on my most extensive notes from a *chhal puja*, even though this did not conform to the paradigm case because the woman was still unmarried, and living at home. The ritual took place at the home of a local Brahman priest. His daughter's daughter had failed her high school exams a couple of years earlier, was experiencing eating disorders, had difficulty speaking, sometimes shook uncontrollably, and dreamed of a woman coming down towards her from a height. They had visited local oracles, and the diagnosis was that she was afflicted by a *chhaya*; specifically, the ghost of a woman who was murdered in the mid-1990s in the forest above the village. This woman had gone to fetch wood in the jungle, where she was raped and later found hanging from a tree. Three suspects were jailed for some time but nothing was ever proven against them. Since then, her ghost/*chhaya* afflicts young women, and in this case, it attached itself to the victim one day when she was cutting grass in the forest. The girl had already worshiped the *chhaya* twice, but without effect.

The girl's grandfather was an impressive character—forceful, proud, and extremely fit, despite being in his sixties. As the priest of a hereditary temple, he was quite ambivalent about the *chhal puja*, and looked on the guru's activities with more than a little suspicion. He continually interrupted Jagdish during the ritual to ask him questions, but this was more out of curiosity than antagonism—after all, he was concerned for his granddaughter's health, which is why he went to so much expense to summon the guru for this puja. Upon arriving, Jagdish arranged the ritual space, drawing a yantra with colored powder on a torn workbasket fragment, covering it with food offerings and a lit lamp, making an image of Masan from barley flour and placing it in the middle of the ritual space, surrounding it with other necessary items such as colored powders, flowers, water from seven sources, rice grains, birth feathers and stalks of the *jhira* plant, which is held to be exceptionally pure. He began by marking her forehead with *pithaim*, and tying a *nala*-thread around her wrist. He directed her in a *samkalpa* vow, and gave her a purifying sip of water. First he recited a Narsingh mantra, "because we are so close to the Shiva temple," and then some mantras that were, in effect, a kind of *prana pratishtha* or "enlivening" of the *eri*s and *acchari*s as he placed them in a tiny palanquin. "Devi, where did you come from? Were you born in eternity, were you born in the earth, or did someone send you on purpose? Earth was first an egg, then it was shattered into twenty pieces. In which piece were you born? What is your mother's name? What is your father's name? What is your lineage [*gotra*]?" In these mantras, Jagdish consistently referred to the *eri*s and *acchari*s as "devi," even though they are not, properly speaking, goddesses—he said that he did this in order "to keep them peaceful."

While reciting the mantras, Jagdish constantly "swept" the girl's body with bird feathers, making long seeping motions from head to toe, after which he would "shake out" the feather over the image of Masan. Clearly this was a ritual transfer of the *chhal* from the girl's body to the image. The technique of sweeping with feathers is called *jhar phuk*,[35] and is found throughout North India. The feathers should come from the *garuda* or Himalayan griffin, said Jagdish, although peacock feathers may also be used. They are bound with stinging nettle stalks. A stalk of the *jhiran* plant can also be used. Continuing to "sweep" the girl, Jagdish next recited *prana pratishtha* mantras for "enlivening" the *chhal*. He recited the names of various gods, scriptures, and so forth, from all over the world. One of the purposes of the ritual, he said, was to transform the ghost of the murdered woman into a proper ancestor so that it could reach heaven (see chapter 6) and stop afflicting young women, and he summoned these gods and other entities so that they would help the ghost manifest itself. Meanwhile the girl sat motionless, as Jagdish continued to "sweep" her and to recite his mantras. She was remarkably passive, neither making any offerings, nor drinking, nor eating anything. As in many other contexts, this clearly illustrated how the female body is so often the passive patient of rituals performed by males.

Continuing to "sweep" the girl's body and recite his mantras, Jagdish now worshiped the four directions, naming the gods and demons residing in each. Then he began the *chhal puja* proper, listing the afflicted parts of her body and commanding the *chhal* to leave them, threatening them that if they didn't do as he said, they "would not get Mother Kali's breast at the Kumbha Mela." He had the sacrificial goat brought in, and spoke directly to it: "You are about to be sacrificed. Kali is coming for you, with her open jaws." With his *ukhel* mantras (see pp. 69) he summoned the gods, "awakened" the forces that had come into the house, or into the girl's body, made them "play"—that is, made them present—and transferred them by means of the sweeping into the image of Masan.

Jagdish continued sweeping, sweeping . . . He praised the *eri* and *acchari* "in their own forms"—that is, by referring to them directly as *eri* and *acchari* and not as "devi"—and continued for a long time to name the various kinds of weapons to be removed from the girl (see pp. 69), all the while sweeping her body. When he recited the mantra of Sayyid, however, he stopped sweeping and instead tossed rice grains on to the barley-flour image. He placed flowers in the girl's hands and did some final mantras, declaring that all was now peaceful (*shanti*). He placed *pithaim* on her forehead, blessed her, and spoke directly to the barley-flour image of Masan:

> It's a happy day for you! You are being worshiped! So stop troubling this girl, over and over again! It's your last puja, whoever you are or

> wherever you're from! Make this girl well, and you, too should stay well! Get rid of this girl's pains and her problems, whatever they are! Listen to me: this girl is your *disha dhyani*, so don't trouble her! It's very bad to do so, it's shameful! We are worshiping you peacefully, so please, give her relief. You are being worshiped for a third time—this is shameful! You must leave her alone now!

He spoke a mantra into some grains of rice, and offered them to the image, in effect telling Masan to go to sleep and wake up in the morning. He put *pith-aim* on the girl's forehead, circled the torn workbasket fragment over her head and set it down, instructing the girl to get up in the morning, bathe, leave her hair unbound, and bring a set of old clothes.

Next morning a few villagers arrived with assorted health-related complaints, and Jagdish empowered some ash with mantras and gave it to them, or fashioned simple amulets for them. I recognized one of the villagers immediately, an old man who was often present during the first *chhal puja*s I had seen, nearly ten years earlier while completing my doctoral research in this village. I mentioned this to him and he laughed, saying, "Yes, I am truly one of the *chan-ban*—I always come to eat the sacrifice." I made a mental note to find out later what *chan-ban* meant.

Jagdish repeated the ritual he had done the previous night, with some slight differences. This time he named the *vir*, ferocious attendants of Masan who actually eat the sacrificial goat, and when he reached the *ukhel* mantras, he "awakened" various forms of Masan and Kachiya. He didn't do this the night before, he said, because it was dark and therefore too dangerous. Next the girl, her grandfather, Jagdish, a small boy from the village, and I climbed a very steep trail to a ridge from which we could see the valley spread out before us, along with the entire chain of the central Himalayas—a spectacular sight! My companions were not interested in the view, however, but rather in exorcizing the *chhal*. We went to the place where the ghost was said to have "grabbed" the girl, and Jagdish began the culminating part of the *chhal puja*, the animal sacrifice. He began with a mantra to Hanuman, asking him to help eliminate all the negative beings that had afflicted the girl. He named the various Masan and used the feather to "sweep" them from the girl's body one last time. This time the Masan were not swept on to the barley flour image, but rather on to the goat. Water was sprinkled on its hooves, a kind of purifying "bath," and then Jagdish explained to him why he was being sacrificed, emphasizing that no one sinned by killing him; neither the priest nor the client nor he who had purchased him. "All these evil things," said Jagdish, "*chhal*, *chhidra*, ghost,

Masan, and so forth . . . all of them will be satisfied by your sacrifice, and they will not afflict the girl anymore."

Now the village boy picked up the goat and circled it over the girl's head. This is a paradigmatic ritual action, resembling the circling of rice or earth over family and livestock before a client visits an oracle (see note 3), and like several other actions of the ritual, it was intended to remove the *chhal* from the victim's body and transfer it to the goat. Jagdish told her to go and put an extra set of clothes over the top of those she was wearing. She did so and returned, and he marked her forehead with *pithaim*. She took a small vessel of water and a sickle, then walked a few short steps to where the *chhaya puja* was to be performed. Meanwhile the goat was beheaded in the bushes, where she could not see it.

Now the *chhaya puja* began. Jagdish recited the *devi* mantra as above, asking "Where were you born? What is your name?" and so forth. This "enlivened" the *chhaya*. A cock was brought, offered to the *chhaya*, and released. The girl poured water out of the vessel onto the earth, offering it to the four directions and to the sun. She next offered *layya* (a mixture of dry fried grains and sweets) to both the *chhaya* and the *eri-acchari*. Jagdish circled rice around her head, and tossed it to the four directions. He recited a mantra commanding the various afflicting beings to return to their own places. Meanwhile a small fire was lit, and over it was placed an old round tin, filled with oil. The girl was directed to stand over the hot oil and look into it. At that moment, she is supposed to see the *chhaya*, superimposed on her own face. She was directed to kick over the tin of hot oil with her foot, and when she did so it spilled into the fire and a huge tongue of flame shot up. She took a few steps, dropped her outermost set of clothes, then walked directly home, holding the scythe in her hand. She was told to neither look behind nor speak to anyone. If the ritual was done properly and if she followed these instructions, the *chhaya* would be left behind and would not afflict her any more.

A dozen or so local men had gathered at some distance below the ridgetop where the puja had been done and had made preparations to "eat the *chhal*." They had gathered wood, built fires, and cooked rice. As soon as the goat was sacrificed it was brought below, its hair was singed off, and it was butchered and cooked. Such feasts always follow *chhal puja*s involving animal sacrifice, and are attended only by local men. Women and outsiders are excluded. The *chhal* are thereby returned to the place from whence they came, by being absorbed into the bodies of these men and eventually passing into the earth through their feces. The men themselves answered my earlier question about the identity of the *chan-ban* when they gleefully said, "*We* are the *chan-ban* who eat the puja![36] *We* are the Masan!" In the end, the *chhal puja* can be understood

as a kind of ritual recycling of the *chhal*—from their original location into the body of the victim, and later back to the place where they belonged, via the bodies of the sacrificial animal and the local men. The *chhal puja* heals affliction by removing various demons from the victim's body and returning them to the place they came from. In most cases, it also encourages the gradual transformation of a married woman's body, by removing negative influences from it, and returning them to her *mait*.

In this chapter I have argued that even though Garhwal in general, and Chamoli District in particular, are well known for their world-famous Hindu temples, it is rather the smaller, local shrines, the more intimate landscape, that is important for ritual healing. This is because according to local ideas and practices, both persons and *devta*s are intimately related to the places they live. They are constantly transacting with these places, so that the places partly determine who the people are, just as the people partly determine the nature of the places. In an oracular consultation, the history of a person, a family, and the place where they reside are "read" in the rice grains or the soil that the client brings from his home; place and person are reflections of each other, because they are mutually constitutive. The oracle sees the path to the origin of the client's problem; the path "emerges" in the oracle's *thali*, and in most cases, a ritual must be performed at that place, and among those persons (or their descendants), where it all began.

Healing rituals include the *kas puja*, which establishes the connection of the client's family to its land via the performance of a ritual at the border of their property, and the *than ki puja*, which illustrates the principle that a *devta*, like a person, must live in a particular place. It connects the shrine to the land on which it is built, as well as to the body of the senior male, according to whose bodily measurements it is constructed. New shrines are constantly being established, and in this way the cult of Bhairav spreads through "the path of aggression," the path of the land, and the path of the *dhyani*. The path of the land means simply that when one acquires land, one also acquires the gods who reside there, illustrating how *devta*s are connected to particular places. The path of the *dhyani* derives from Bhairav's great affection for his "out-married daughters," and illustrates the enduring relationship of a woman to her natal place, despite a dominant ideology that denies this. Finally, the *chhal puja* is a method for returning demons and other malevolent beings to the land from which they came, thus bringing to an end the victim's affliction.

The landscape exemplified in these rituals is a landscape that embodies and absorbs the actions of those who live in it. That is why their histories can be read in its soil, or in the rice that is grown in it. Furthermore, this landscape is

clearly ordered into a kind of spectrum of intimacy, where one end represents familial intimacy and unity, while the other represents alienation and danger. The most intimate part of the landscape is the family home and land, along with the family shrine, all of which are together defined in and through the *kas puja* as a single unit. More distant parts of the landscape are village lands, the fields of others, then the dangerous forests and distant pastures, the dark and threatening river bottoms, the lonely mountain tops, where the *chhal* and other malevolent beings dwell.

In general, one can say that local ideas about landscape and memory illustrate Casey's point, that the modern conception of empty "space" is misleading. On the contrary, Chamoli District is made of *places* that are always already defined in terms of human history and action. That is why a description of the cult purely in terms of social relations would be inadequate. As Casey points out, it is not the case that "space" is filled up with culture. Rather, human experience and culture are always already in place.

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4

Oracles, Gurus, and Distributed Agency

Agency

In the 1980s and 1990s, "agency" became a fashionable topic in social theory.[1] Partly this was because the entire problematic was confused with a set of moral and ethical issues. Typically, agency was contrasted with "structure" (e.g., Giddens 1979), and the central question was how persons pursue their individual projects and interests—that is, how they "exercise agency"—within the multiple, more-or-less constraining structures of society. From there it was only a short step to an investigation of how marginalized or oppressed persons resisted structures of power. Agency thus came to be conflated with "resistance," so that feminists focused on women's agency in resisting patriarchal structures, post-colonial theorists wrote about the agency of the formerly colonized, queer theorists discussed agency as resistance to heterosexism, and so forth. As Ahearn (2001), Keane (2003), and I (2006a) have all pointed out, the groundswell of interest in agency can be traced at least partly to interest in the ethical aspects of these discussions.

Most discussions of agency assume that it is a capability or a power exercised by individual persons, closely connected to or even identical with free will.[2] This implicit definition is rarely justified or defended, and in my view it is nothing more than the effect of a pervasive but unexamined assumption in Euro-American social theory: that "the individual" is a universal subject, as, for example,

in so-called rational choice theory. But agency is not limited to individuals—indeed, I argue below that it is not even limited to humans. If we define agency rather straightforwardly as the capacity to effect changes in the external world, then it is perfectly reasonable to ascribe it to groups, organizations, even to nonhuman entities. This is precisely what has been done in a set of recent, fascinating discussions of the agency of nonhuman primates (Small 1993), machines (Pickering 1995), technologies (Dobres 2000; Latour 1987 and 1993), and signs (Colapietro 1989; Peirce 1955). Also relevant here are theories of collective intention[3] and distributive cognition.[4] The former argue that group intentions have particular characteristics and are more than merely the sum of individual intentions, the latter that knowledge of complex systems is distributed among numerous agents, no single one of whom necessarily has knowledge of the complete system.

There is nothing particularly mystical or religious about the idea of nonhuman or complex (collective or distributed) agency. It can be compared with Foucault's notion of intentionality without a subject (cf. Good 1994: 69), and is thoroughly consistent with realist, individualist theories of social action (Searle 1995: 41; Tuomela 1995). In fact, we deal with complex agents all the time. Universities, trade unions, and bridge clubs are all agents that have been consciously designed to accomplish collective purposes. If, despite the pronounced individualism of the business world, corporations can unproblematically be regarded as agents—that is, as legal persons who own property, hire and fire employees, report and distribute profits, and so forth—then surely we can regard deities and ancestors as "real" agents in those societies where their existence and their powers are axiomatic.[5]

In my view, the fundamental intellectual and pedagogical tasks of ethnology are to insist that Euro-American ways of perceiving and interpreting the world are not the only ones, so that what we take to be "natural" categories are often thoroughly cultural; to warn against the "scientizing" or "universalizing" of our own folk beliefs; and to illustrate both of these points through careful ethnographic description and analysis of a variety of other cultures. In this chapter, I pursue these tasks by insisting that the reduction of agency to a property of individuals is sheer ethnocentrism, especially if it is true that, as many have argued, "the individual" is cultural construct and by no means an ontological essence (see chapter 5.)

Exemplary studies of agency in the Indian and especially the Hindu context include Ron Inden's (1990) description and analysis of what he calls the "complex agency" of early medieval Indian political formations, which consisted not only of the agency of individual persons but also of collective institutions and deities; my own (2000;2002, chapter 6; 2006a) and Sutherland's (1988, 2003,

2006) accounts of agency in the "divine kingdoms" of the Central Himalayas; and Dipesh Chakrabarty's radical attempt to "take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human," which involves, among other things, recognizing them as authentic agents (2000: 16).[6]

The point is simply that ideas about agency vary among cultures. As an ethnologist, I need not pronounce on the ontological status of gods, ghosts, individuals, or limited liability companies, but only note that each of these agents is associated with a particular historical and cultural context, and that varying theories about who (or what) can be an agent have wide-ranging implications for other parts of life, including illness and healing. What causes illness? Is it karma? Sorcery? Germs? Stress? Where is healing agency located? In healers? Medicines? Mantras? Gods? In posing such questions, it is important to recognize that agency also implies patiency (Inden 1990), in other words, that there is an object or "patient" for every agentive act. In what follows, I take a close look at oracles and gurus, the two main types of ritual specialists in the healing cult of Bhairav. I show that they are distinguished above all in terms of agency and patiency. The oracles are the gods' patients: they subordinate their personal agency to that of the gods whose vessels they are, and their reputation and success depends on the degree to which they are thought to completely embody the god. The gurus, on the other hand, are masters of the spirits, and their reputation and success depends on the degree to which they are believed to control supernatural beings, turning them into their "disciples," that is, their patients. In what follows, I introduce several oracles and gurus, mostly in their own words, and attempt to show how such relations of agency and patiency work themselves out in practice.

The Oracles

Nilam's Wife

The first oracle I ever interviewed was Nilam's wife, in Mayapuri village, in January 1996. I walked with my Rajput friends Vishnu Singh and Dabar Singh from Toli to Mayapuri, where we descended past a series of poor, half-built houses to the center of the village. My high-caste friends were rather uncomfortable entering the Harijan hamlet, and Nilam's wife didn't make it any easier for them. When Dabar Singh asked what she was going to do, she made a lewd remark, and laughed at his distress. Then she took out a metal *thali*, or platter, and Vishnu Singh placed some rice from his home on it, along with 1.25 rupees. She tossed the rice rhythmically up and down in the platter, and was

quickly in trance. She answered Vishnu Singh's questions, and then it was my turn. I had never done this sort of thing before, but I had to invent some question or other, so I asked her why my daughter, back home in Christchurch, was suffering from sleeplessness. In trance, Nilam's wife told me that my daughter had been bewitched by a Bengali sorcerer—perhaps, I thought wryly, it was the Bengali geneticist who was my colleague at the university, and one of our best friends. After the session was over, I asked Nilam's wife how she came to be a *puchvari*, and she began her answer by telling me of the origin of the god.

> In the village of Dol there were three Harijan brothers [see figure 4.1]. Two of the brothers had sons, but the third had only one daughter. He brought in a *ghar javaim*[7] to marry his daughter, and they had a son and a daughter. Then the grandparents died, and the two brothers decided to kill the *ghar javaim*. They thought that this would make their niece would run away, and that that they could then take her land. They took the couple into the forest to cut bamboo for making a roof, and they killed the *ghar javaim*.
>
> The woman wept and wept. "What shall I do? How shall I live? How can I raise my children?" She used to work in the fields, and she couldn't find a plowman, so she plowed the field herself, using a small mattock. She was crying, but then she heard a voice saying, "Don't cry, I'll take care of everything." She looked around but saw no one. In the middle of a night, the god brought an ox and tied it up in her cowshed. I don't know how many generations ago this happened—it was a very long time ago. The voice told her not to worry, that he would destroy her enemies. He began to afflict her uncles, and eventually they were completely ruined. After her children grew up, the god revealed himself, he told her who he was. She had

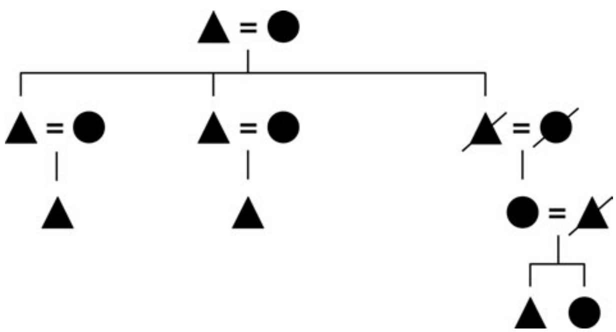


FIGURE 4.1. The family of the Harijan from Dol.

a daughter who got married somewhere, and this daughter, too, had some troubles, but the god went with her. My father's mother was from that community. The god goes everywhere with his *disha*s [see "How the Cult Spreads," in chapter 3]. His original place was in Dol, but now he lives in many places. . . .

My mother was from Silangi in Dasholi. The god's *than* was below the road, and he came with her when she got married and moved to Kankhul, and he came with me from Kankhul to Mayapuri. My mother must have had some trouble, so he came to her. And if I have any emergency [*apat*], he'll come to help me. My father's father was his guru, and after that my father, and after my father died, his brother became a guru. When I dance, people offer me money. Some give a little, some give a lot—the god is satisfied with all. . . .

In Jasyara near Kankhul, the landlord [*thokdar*] was having a new house built. A carpenter [*mistri*] was working on it. Somehow, the landlord got the idea that the carpenter had done something wrong with his daughter, and he didn't pay him for his work. So the carpenter went to the *than*, circumambulated it, and said, "He hasn't paid me." Then the landlord began to be afflicted, and he went to an oracle, and the god danced and said, "There's *kabar*[8] in your house." The carpenter had put it there.

When the *dosh* came on me, I got a bit disturbed. It was during the rainy season, and my husband thought I'd gone crazy. I would have fevers all night, but when I went to Karanprayag to see the doctor, he said that there was no fever. So we were wondering what exactly the problem was. Then I went to Kankhul to ask the guru to come, but he couldn't because there had been a death in his family, and he was in death pollution. I consulted various oracles: some said it was a *chhal*, some said it was a *chhidra* [see "Exorcising the Crafty Demons," in chapter 3]. But the *devta* wasn't satisfied; he wanted his own guru. Finally the guru, who is my relative, came from Kankhul. He made the *devta* dance and asked him what was wrong with me. He said to fling some barley seeds in my face and ask. They did so, and the *devta* began to dance in my body. He dragged me away, and told me who he was. My husband paid him a fine [*dandkar*], and I got well. My mind was all right again, and I worshiped him a year later. . . .

There was a family from Dhanpur living in village K. The son went crazy and came to do a consultation with me. I had never done it before! I went to my husband and asked him what to do: what if

the *devta* didn't come? The family from K. had come into my shelter, asking me to figure out their problem. My husband was with the buffaloes, and I went and told him they'd come to do a consultation. I asked him what to do, and he said to take out the *thali*, and if the god descended, then well and good—I'd be able to sort out their problem. I spread my blanket, brought out the *thali*, they placed their rice grains in it, and the god descended! It was my very first consultation, and I did a lot of them after that, but nowadays the god's power has decreased.

Once there were five families living in one house, here in Mayapuri. Two of them moved to Chaura Sain and two moved to Baindoli. So only one family was left, Tiku and his wife. She was sick for a year. The doctors said she lacked blood—she was very sick! Tiku took his family to the home of his father in Nauti. Now, our god's *than* was below Tiku's cowshed. The god must have heard Tiku's wife weeping as she left, and while Tiku was sleeping in his parents' house, he saw me in his dream, and I said to him, "Don't worry, everything will be all right. There is some *kabar* in your home." Tiku was talking in his sleep—they asked him about it when he awoke, and he said, "My village sister is speaking to me."

He had faith in his own god, but he said, "Well, if I get some relief [from her god], then fine." The three brothers all came to Mayapuri next day, and summoned their own god. The brothers told Tiku that he might as well offer a *ront* [sweet fried bread] to my god as well, and so he came to my house to do so, and to ask me about the dream. They brought some flour and jaggery to my house to make the bread, but in the rainy season jaggery goes soft, so I went ahead and drank it in my tea. We didn't have any jaggery in the house, and I thought that I would just drink it and replace it later. After I drank the tea I went to cut grass in the field, and something pushed hard on the back of my neck till I was nearly doubled over. I looked behind, but there was no one there. And then I found that I couldn't move my arms or my legs. So I came crawling home on my hands and knees. I thought that whoever it was would make himself known in my dream. I was in bad shape! My husband said, "God, give us relief and we will offer you a *ront*!" That evening some other god was dancing in the village and I went to see him, thinking that perhaps I'd get some rice grains and he would cure me. Tiku's god was dancing, and he asked Tiku what was wrong. Tiku told him that two families had left his house for Baindoli and two for Chaura Sain,

> and that now he had also left. Then my god cried out [in my body] and began to dance.
>
> Now, some think that it's inappropriate for one god to dance in another god's ritual, but Tiku had to know what was wrong with his house, and he believed that he would get the answer there. He said, "Whatever god is dancing here, tell me." But then my god fell silent, and my husband was angry with me for dancing in another person's ritual. Tiku said, "You'll be beaten if you don't tell!" He paid a fine [*dandkar*], and once more the god descended on me. My husband was dragging me home, but Tiku stopped him, and the god said, "Come with me." We went into Tiku's house, and I passed out. I didn't know where the god had gone. Then he descended on me again, and struck the wall with a pair of tongs, and said, "Dig here!"
>
> God knows if they knew where the *kabar* was, or whether my god had seen it—I certainly hadn't! Tiku's guru thought that he was in control of the situation; after all, the gods were dancing in his *thali*. But when the *kabar* was discovered, he didn't know what to do with it. He said to keep it at the crossroads, and the next day they took it to the cremation ground. And the god who discovered this *kabar* can also tell what you are thinking.

Nilam's wife's narrative illustrates the centrality of the theme of social justice in the healing cult: the men who unjustly murder their sister's husband are punished by the god, the carpenter is exploited by his high-caste patron and calls on the god for revenge. Also important is the idea that the god chooses both Nilam's wife and her mother as his oracles because they are his *dhyani*s or "out-married daughters" (see chapter 3, "How the Cult Spreads") Nilam's wife emphasizes patiency in her biography: she is chosen by the god; when he possesses her she is out of control; she claims that it was the god and not her who knew about the "rubbish" planted in the wall; when she speaks of the god she always uses the third person; she is punished by the god for eating "his" jaggery without permission. The patiency of the next oracle, Suraj Singh, is rather more nuanced.

Suraj Singh

I first met Suraj Singh in March 2002. I had gone with my assistant Karin Polit to visit Gaurja Mai, but she was not doing consultations that day, so we returned to the highway where we had parked our motorcycle. The road was nearly empty; there was only one lonely tea-stall operator, whom we asked if

there were any other oracles nearby that we might visit. He directed us to Suraj Singh's home, and we picked our way down through the fields to a charming little cottage on the riverbank, where nearly a dozen clients already sitting, waiting their turn. We recorded the session for an hour or more, and when it was over and the clients had left, we asked Suraj Singh how he came to be an oracle, and he told us the following, remarkable story.

> My first wife died, and our daughter went to Dehra Dun to live with her uncle, my older brother. She got lost and everyone thought she was dead. I was very anxious, of course—I actually dreamed that someone was calling from outside, telling me that my daughter had gotten lost. But when I went outside to see who was calling, there was no one there. It was just an appearance [*abhas*]. I awoke at about 4 a.m., and sat there wondering what had happened, and thought, "Perhaps she wasn't lost, perhaps she has died." It was the 18th of February, 1991. I told my new wife about this dream where someone had told me that my girl was lost, and she said, "It happens sometimes, don't worry." I said, "It's not just a worry—something has really happened." We drank tea, and then my daughter's uncle arrived at about 5:30. He had booked a taxi. He knocked, I asked who it was, he answered, I recognized his voice, and he said, "Your daughter has disappeared."
>
> My head was spinning—this was the girl I had raised from infancy! She had gone to live with him when she was three, and at the age of nine she disappeared. I fainted, but they revived me. Then I wondered if she might come here alone—but how could a simple mountain girl find her way back home? On that very day, I went to Dehra Dun. Her uncle said that whatever had happened was his fault. "I am the guilty one here," he said. And on that day the god came to me for the first time, and said, "She is not dead, she is alive. She will return home after six or seven years." He told me the side she had gone to: this side or that side?[9] Even I didn't believe that she was still alive. But I had a dream that very night. I couldn't recognize the face, but whoever it was told me she was alive and would come home. However he also said, "Even I can't bring her home that quickly. Be at peace." I cried there, and I died there, and after three or four days, I came home. I had all these things here at home: firetongs, *phavada*, a staff of timaru wood with a bag hanging from it, and a trident.[10] I remembered that people used to believe in such things. I wrapped them all together, and I swore an oath: "If the girl returns alive I shall worship you, but if she dies, then you die, and

I die, too! You will never be worshiped here!" This is the oath I swore that day. Then the god possessed me. He said, "Why did you do this?" God knows whether it was my own soul [*atma*], or whether it was me speaking, or what. I wasn't really conscious.

One or two years went by, and when she didn't return, I didn't know what to do. I felt as though I was going crazy, and perhaps I was! I had a small son then, just one year old. The god possessed him, but he was only one year old, so how could he speak? I was so upset! I thought, "What has happened to this child?" He was possessed just like I am nowadays, with his left eye closed, and his hands behind his back. I was already troubled because of my daughter, and now my worries increased. I was angry, and thought, "What's happening to my son?" I hoped that no harm would come to him. So I went to an oracle, who said, "Your girl disappeared, but you have kept something outside. And it is coming on you, and also on your son. Worship that thing!" I said, "I'll never worship it! I will only worship it when my daughter comes home!"

Then my sister and her husband came, bringing the guru, to worship the god. This was in '96 or '97. But I forbade the worship. I argued with them. I said, "No goat will be sacrificed, and there will be no puja—I will not allow any puja! If I have to worship it, then I will cut my own throat! That is certain! Do you want to kill me, or the goat?" They urged me, but I refused. We kept arguing, and then the god possessed my son, who was now five years old. He possessed him fiercely! And I said, "You shouldn't have come on this child! But since you've come, tell me: Where is my daughter? If she's not coming, then tell me that she's dead. At least I will be able to lift this stone from my heart!" And then the god spoke through my son: "On February 26th I will bring news of the girl." That's what this five-year-old child said. I didn't understand how or why a child could be speaking of such things. And do you know what? On the twenty-fifth of February I remembered that news was supposed to come the next day. A whole year had passed since the child spoke. And I said, "If the news comes, fine, and if not, then I will take this god straight to the cremation ground!" The next day at 1:00, her letter came. It said, "Daddy, I am not dead. I am alive and living in Ambala City. I don't know how to get to or from this house. Please come and take me: I am in trouble—I am having bad dreams!"

There were seven boys in the house where she was staying. They had married her there, at the age of fifteen. And they had all died of

the pox. Only one boy was left alive. Her husband had also died, and with his dying breath he had said, "I am the Bhairav of Kashi Lal![11] Leave this girl alone!" Then they told her to send the letter to me. They said, "You are troubled, and so are we." They called some holy man and asked him the cause of their suffering, and he told them this girl belonged to someone else and they should send her home because it was a very serious affair. And sometimes she, too, got possessed: sometimes her eyes twisted, sometimes her arms, sometimes her legs.

So I went to get her. She had given me her address, but I didn't know the way. I didn't know where I should get down from the bus, nothing. Now, Ambala is a very big city. I caught the bus there from Haridwar. I had her address and house number, but I didn't know how to get there. Actually, I needed to get down eight or nine kilometers before the station, even though I didn't know it at the time. But precisely at the right place, my hands twisted, and my eyes began to act very strangely. There was a man sitting next to me, and he got scared—he thought I was going to die. He asked me what was wrong, and I said, "Nothing, it's OK." He said, "You're looking all twisted up [*ulta sidha*]," and again I said, "It's nothing." I asked him what city it was, he said it was Ambala, and once again I was possessed—it was as if someone was picking me up by the shoulders and pushing me out the door. I don't know if the fellow next to me did it, or some supernatural being did it, but I got down, asked a Rickshaw-driver for the address, and he told me that the neighborhood was very close, only a few hundred meters. He told me the correct street to go down. The houses were not numbered: if they had been, it would have been easy to find her. I went ahead, and the god possessed me again. Someone told me to get out of the way, and I was worried. They might think that I was crazy and throw stones at me, or something. So with great difficulty I brought myself under control, and came to her house, and just as I was in front of the gate, my eyes closed and I fell against the door—exactly the right door! It was an iron door, and I knocked, and someone answered. I came back to consciousness and said, "It's nothing—where is number 120?" The man asked why I was looking for number 120, and I said I'd come to meet a girl. He asked which girl, I told him her name, and he said, "That's right—she lives here in this house." I went inside, they brought me a chair, and my daughter came to meet me. Then we talked, and she told me everything that had happened. I could have filed a case against them from Dehra Dun, but I said, "Oh well, I've got my daughter back,

why worry about it?" Then she came home, we did puja, and once again my son was possessed.

The god's work became regular after that. People would come with big problems, and I would suddenly be possessed, and would tell them why they had come, what their problem was, and what they should do about it. There was a great deal of talk about it, and I didn't know how I should handle the situation, how I should speak, but after a while I started to talk automatically.

Suraj Singh's story clearly shows that an oracle's relationship to his deity can be rather nuanced, and not exclusively a matter of patiency. By his own account, Suraj Singh fought the god at every turn: by resisting his possession, by threatening to forbid the god's worship, most of all by attempting to force the god to recover his missing daughter. But he was destined to be the god's oracle, and ultimately his agency was subordinated to that of the deity.

Gaurja Mai

The woman I came to call Gaurja Mai was one of the most interesting oracles I met, not only because she was so articulate and self-confident, but also because she was from a high caste, and her story shows the ambivalent relationship of high-caste people to the whole complex of oracles, gurus, and ritual healing. The first oracle I discussed, Nilam's wife, was from a low caste, and so was Suraj Singh, even though he had adopted the high-caste title "Singh." I have the impression that in Chamoli District, a majority of oracles are from the lower castes, but certainly not all of them. The following interview with Gaurja Mai shows not only how a high-caste woman like her got involved in the cult, but also illustrates how this involvement can be problematic and embarrassing. Gaurja Mai was a strong and powerful woman, constantly measuring her personal agency against the men of her family as well as the goddess who possessed her. But although she was able to prevail against the men, she had to submit to the goddess. Perhaps that is because she identified so strongly with her, as she hints toward the end of the interview.

I met Gaurja Mai at the very beginning of my research. My assistant Dabar Singh had made some inquiries, and found out that she had a very good reputation for accurate diagnosis. We found our way to her home one morning, and I was struck by her intelligence and her "presence." During that first session, she spontaneously made the following comments about her experiences:

I can only do the consultation while sitting on my own seat [*asan*]; I can't do it just anywhere. I'm a woman, not a man, and I would get

a bad reputation if I went around doing it here and there. First I bathe, and I don't eat or drink anything until the work is over. At the beginning [of the consultation] I do a very long description [*varnan*] of the goddess Gaurja Mai, and then she speaks. Bhairav is with her and he demands cheroots for smoking. Sometimes Sayyid [see chapter 3, "Exorcizing the Crafty Demons"] also comes and demands cigarettes, too.

Gaurja Mai is the goddess of my family. She used to come over my father. And she also comes over my father-in-law here in this village. For many years there was no buffalo sacrifice [*athvad*] here, and she didn't come on anyone. Then a few years back there was a buffalo sacrifice—she came over me, and many people offered *sada* [shiny red and white head cloths]—enough of them to fill four baskets. One from every family. But it's not right for god to come on a woman. I've remonstrated [*dvaya dalna*] with her; I said, "Why do you insist on possessing me?" The real goddess dwells in Chopata, and she came from there to the fort, and from the fort to Top village. My family chased away [the *devta*] Latu, and then they chased away [the goddess] Chandika. They chased her out because she wanders so far, along with her Nautiyal priests.[12] Gaurja Mai's *mait* is in Kumara, and the Nautiyals are her priests.[13] When she began dancing in me, my whole family was upset: mother, father, brothers, father-in-law, and the rest. They said, "People like us [i.e. high-status people] don't dance—why are you dancing? You've shamed us [literally, "cut our noses"]." But many of my clients come from faraway places: from Almora, Pitthoragarh, and Rampur in Kumaon. And I speak in their dialect, so they have faith in me. When Gaurja Mai plays the *thali*, she doesn't speak Hindi, but rather Garhwali.

After the session was over, I conducted a more formal interview with her. Toward the end of the interview, she talked about her own life.

WS: How did Gaurja Mai come on you the first time?

GM: There was a buffalo sacrifice [*ashthabali*, literally "the sacrifice of eight animals"] lasting nine days and nights. There was a vigil [*jagar*] and so forth: a big *dhuni* [ascetic's fire] was lit, and the iron staff and the *phavada* were heated. Sometimes the goddesses [*mai*] eat burning lamps. Chandpur Fort is down below, Kal Pir Badshah and Gaurja Mai and Kali Mai are up above, and below them is Maha Durga, who is a popular goddess. But her death-dealing form is above.[14]

So we were all sitting above and she came over me. At first, people didn't understand—they thought it was Bhairav because he always comes there. But then she asked [through me]: "Where is my pathfinding hero? Where is my Goblin Champion?[15] No one may touch my weapons [the *phavada* and the other items] without my permission!" Then a Garuda[16] came from Chandpur Fort and sat in a tree. And Bhagawati said, "This is my goddess [*mai*]—who can stop her?" The *phavada* and the other things didn't get hot. Then I went and danced in the hot coals—it took seven men to remove me, but I wasn't burned. I didn't even know where I'd gone or what had happened. And when Gaurja Mai touched the weapons [that is, when she touched them after becoming possessed], they heated up.

The last sentences may be somewhat confusing, because Gaurja Mai speaks of the goddess in the third person, even when repeating what the goddess said while possessing her. When Bhagawati said, "This is my goddess" she was referring to the oracle herself, Gaurja Mai, with whom I was conducting the interview. The reason that the *phavada* did not get hot was that even though the goddess had chosen Gaurja Mai as her oracle, she had not herself placed them in the fire. Later, however, when she touched, them, they became red-hot. Gaurja Mai went on to explain that there are four local goddesses, or *mai*s: Lolchatti Mai, Gaurja Mai, Kali Mai, and Kalinka Mai. They eat the burning wicks of the lamps: sixty-four of them are wrapped in a pipal-tree leaf and lit, and then offered to the goddesses.

GM: After that I danced, blessed people, and gave *putraphal*.[17] The *devta*'s champions dance all day, but *mai* dances only during the watches of the night [*pahar*]. And when they go to get the *pati*,[18] she rides on someone else's shoulders.

WS: How did you start doing consultations?

GM: She just grabs someone and they speak [*bakna*]. I tried to stop it—I even sacrificed a goat to her. I am embarrassed—I don't like it! But the goddess punished me a lot. I had to go to Haryana with my husband and children, I had to have a stomach operation. The goddess said, "You must worship me for twenty-seven years." And I've not even completed nine years, only seven! The goddess has demanded a bronze *thali*, but it's not come yet. The Swami down the road brought me a steel *thali* and a renouncer's cloth bag from Ayodhya.

DS: Which Bharav is with her?

GM: Kashi Lal Bhairav, Namadu Baba.

DS: Who speaks through you?

GM: Mai tells him what to say, and he speaks [*bakta hai*]. It's the champion [*vir*] who says "Adesh!" and so forth And Mai says "Alakh!" They speak a different language. At the beginning of this session you heard me summon all the gods from the earth with its nine regions [*navakhand prithvi*] into the *thali*. One must formally invite [*adesh*] them into the *thali*. I call the five gods, the five great gods, to protect the *thali* so that it doesn't do anything harmful.

In the fort, Kal Pir [sic] is a Muslim, and for many years, people have wanted to build a temple here, but the gods and the local people both opposed it—everything we need is here in the fort. The fort belongs to Kal Pir, and he doesn't allow any [god] to enter my *thali* until we salaam him—you must have heard me say,

> Salaam to your mother wind,
> Salaam to your father the Punjabi,
> Salaam to your old Brahman mother,
> Salaam to your throne in Delhi,
> Salaam to your quid of Betel,
> Salaam to your stick of clove![19]

and so forth. There's no way I could remember such a long recitation [*vyakhyan*]—it's the gods who say it. They do their own recitation, from Bengal to Tibet to this fort. The goddess is the same, whether you call her Gaura or Gaurja, Nanda Devi or Chandika, Kali or Parvati or Durga. She's taken thousands of forms ever since the fire sacrifice of Daksh Prajapati.

I'm uneducated—if I were educated, would I be playing this *thali*? [Laughs.] My brothers and uncles said, "If the god dances, we'll throw your *thali* away." That's why the god doesn't dance here, why I only do the consultation while sitting. They shouldn't have married me so close to home . . . but it was my fate.[20] And now they say, "Not only are you living close to home, but you also do these [shameful] consultations!" People say to us, "Your daughter is dancing in Dhara." My elder brother came and asked me to close the *thali*—he's angry, and so am I, but what can I do? I put a silver idol on the wall and offered to worship her like that, but she wouldn't accept it . . . instead she's given me this punishment—no tea, no food, and I have to bathe no matter how cold it is, even if there's snow. I can't eat food anywhere else. She's really put me in chains! I have so many years left when I won't even be able to eat meat or fish.

I'm still young, but she's made me into a nun [*sadhu*]! I have to be very careful about pollution—I have to be just like her.

When I close my eyes, I see the whole scene [of the client]—that's why the god says, "It's like this" and "It's like that." That's why I close my eyes while playing the *thali*, but I open them when I'm explaining things to the client.

WS: You see the whole scene? Village, houses, everything?

GM: Yes—otherwise how could the god tell all those things? I see their houses, gods, shrines [*than*], everything.

After that she talked about her travels to Dunagiri, Baijnath, and Someshvar in Kumaon, apparently wishing to make the point that she was well traveled and sophisticated. She pointed out that the rice collected from clients was used only for feeding the deity, and not for regular cooking.[21] Three weeks later I returned with Dabar Singh and his wife, to make a video and to ask further questions. On that day she spoke of her extensive travels to Northeast India, Punjab, Delhi, Haryana, and other places. She never did consultations in these other places, she said. "I'm ready to sing hymns and songs, to dance, and so forth. I'm the best at all of these things, and I am also a trained midwife, but in this house no one listens to me." She could have lived anywhere, she says, but for the sake of her honor she stayed in the village. She is a Kshatriya, after all. "Who can understand women's nature?" she asks. "They're so stupid that they'll eat shit! But I am different: I am the chairperson of the local women's society, I perform emergency midwifery, I am the headperson of the village council. There are forty-eight villages in this council and I know them all!" I was left with the impression of a strong and self-confident woman who, against her will, had been made into the patient of an even more powerful goddess.

The Gurus

Triumph in Ali

An excerpt from my journal, February 20, 1999:

> This morning I went to visit Guru Darpal in Mayapuri, and as soon as I got there he said he was going to do a ritual in his daughter's house nearby. "You go with Sacchu," he said. "The two of you go and make the gods dance in Darmoli." I was rather pleased to be treated like a disciple and given this task—it was only later that I came to

realize that he had probably sent us there because the client was so poor and the “assignment” so unpleasant.

Sacchu and I descended the steep valley, crossed the river, and found ourselves in a village where a group of the so-called Bhotiyas,[22] who formerly conducted the cross-border trade with Tibet, had been re-settled. Here they plied the trade with which they were widely associated in Chamoli: the distillation and sale of country liquor. We ordered a bottle, and because in Garhwal one never drinks liquor without some kind of savoury [*namkin*] to accompany it, Sacchu also ordered a local treat that I had never sampled before: a raw foreleg of goat, accompanied by a bowl of salt! We gnawed our way through the meat, finished off a second bottle of hooch, and then began to climb (a bit unsteadily) the very steep path to the village of Ali.

For years, I had admired Ali from my window in Nauti, perhaps ten kilometers away as the crow flies. It was situated on top of a small mountain of near-perfect conical shape, and had a commanding view out over the valley. Such admiring thoughts were, however, rather far from my mind as I struggled, partially inebriated, up the steep path. But I was encouraged by the sound of a *huraki* drum, which intermittently reached our ears as we climbed. I wondered what kind of a ritual was happening in Ali. Suddenly the path flattened out, and within minutes we found ourselves in the central village square, where the ritual was taking place. But what an unusual scene it was!

In the middle of the square, surrounded by onlookers, sat my friend, the guru Surendra from Gair Sain, whom I had visited just a few weeks before. He was playing his *huraki* drum and another man was playing the *thali*—but nothing was happening! No gods were dancing and no one was in trance. This was very strange indeed. I strode to the center of the packed square, where Surendra was sitting, and embraced him—a rather dramatic entrance for the foreign ethnologist! It turned out that poor Surendra had been trying for hours to make the god dance, but without success. His voice was gone and he was obviously exhausted from his efforts. Nothing was working. The god’s arena was “closed,” it was “at a standstill.”[23] I kept urging Sacchu to pick up the *huraki* and play, but he refused to do so, saying that this would be impolite, since it was Surendra who had been invited as the guru, and not he. But Surendra, too, began urging him to play, and so he finally picked up the drum, tightened the straps, warmed up for a few seconds, and began to sing. Within five minutes, the square was filled with dancing, ecstatic gods! They

shouted and sang, raised their hands above their heads, flung rice at their devotees, smiled and called out blessings. Some of them expressed their frustration even while dancing, saying that they had been waiting since yesterday for the *parv*, the correct time, the moment when everything "comes together" and the gods manifest themselves (Stanley 1977). What is the point of worshiping the god, someone asked me later, if he doesn't dance?

Over in the corner a priest with long white hair and beard has been tending the god's fire. Now he brings a brazier of smoking incense and waves it before the dancing gods. One of them, dancing in the body of a woman, calls out, "I want to leave! Get me out of here!" but the people in the audience reply, "You are god [Bhagwan]— who can tell you what to do?" Sacchu asks the god not to leave; he asks him (or is it her? I cannot tell) to accept the peoples' rice, to bless them, and the priest makes the same request. Now another god, dancing in the body of a woman, calls out "Am I fake [*jutha*]? Am I fake? I am Kashi Lal's Bhairav! Am I fake?" and the people respond, "No, you are not fake! You are not!" Yet another god is calling out from across the courtyard: "Out! Let me out!"[24] A local man says, "If he's asking to be let out, then let him out! Let him dance!" The god himself calls out, "One of my brothers hasn't come. That's why I've not appeared yet. Why hasn't my brother come? How will I bring him? How will I bring him? He's a milk drinker! He won't hide! He won't hide!" While all this is happening, Sacchu tells them that they should wait for the proper time to summon this god. They should wait for his *parv*, which comes late at night.

By now the gods are dancing madly, whirling past us, laughing and shouting, blessing and prophesying. Surendra looks rather dejected, though he is doing his best to hide the fact. Another possessed man dances up next to us, and says that he is from the village of Kot, and that no one has the courage to bind him, only the guru. "I've come for the sake of my *dhyani*s," he calls out. "There's no *dosh* here! Now I will give you my rice grains, and leave! I've come for the daughter of Kothyar Bar! I solve your problems by my own hand! I am the beloved of the *dhyani*s! I protect the family! Hoooooooohh! If you have any troubles, then I am with you! If anyone calls me I will eat him; he won't survive!" A man standing nearby looks frightened, and asks, "Will you eat my family too?" But the god replies, "No! I am the protector of the family! Tell me, my *disha*,[25] when you were stained, didn't I go to Dobari Bar for you?" As the god speaks, a

young woman is possessed and shouts out in the background: "I never take puja from my *dhyani*s; I only look after them. I stay in my own place, I don't follow after the *dhyani*s; I protect them from my own place. I'll take the rice grains and go now, guru, OK?" A bystander says, "If anyone has done something wrong, then don't let them go! Seize them!" Then the deity possessing the man comes and speaks to Sacchu, promising that he will fulfill his heart's desire within six months. Sacchu tells him that his father and even his grandfather and great-grandfather worshiped him, and the god replies, "You are not from here, you're from across the river—but it's all right, because this is your old place!" The atmosphere is hot, wild, exciting—so many gods possessed and dancing! A man begs a blessing from a possessed woman; she accuses him of "forgetting" and "abandoning" her by not offering worship; another young woman, obviously distressed, tells a *devta* how she was sexually assaulted by a relative. Her husband has left her, and so she has fled her marital home and come here, desperately seeking an end to her suffering.

Sacchu and I must go. We have an appointment, Darpal sent us to do the puja in Darmoli tonight. Surendra is asking Sacchu to stay, since the gods' arena is so lively, but we must leave, says Sacchu—we must! A woman asks the god to find employment for her son. Another woman begs one of the gods to make her husband return; he has been missing for eleven years. "Parameshvari," she says, "I've done nothing wrong! Please send him home!" But the god tells her that her husband will not return. "Look!" he says, "Look at my hand: it's empty! [he shows her his empty palm with no rice grains in it]: bad, bad, bad! Why did you toss away his papers?" The woman pleads, "Parameshvari, you're all I have!" and the god says, "If you didn't toss away the papers, then say so, say so now!" Now the woman begins to sob, "Don't be angry, please don't be angry!" A series of worshipers approach another woman who is in trance, and she gives each of them a *putraphal*, "the fruit of a son," an orange that they bind carefully in the end of their saris and then take home, vowing not to eat another until they produce a son. They look so very needy, these Pahari women. Needy and sad, desperate to have a male child. When the oracle puts the *putraphal* in their saris, she pushes it down *hard*, as if she is pushing something right down into their stomach, into their womb. . . . Now they're about to put the god to sleep, and we have to go to the next village to do our work. It's going to be such a long night! We drank those two bottles of liquor in

Devalkot, we spent hours climbing to this place, Sacchu complains that his legs are tired, and I am exhausted from hours of sitting and singing the *bhamvar* along with him. Now it's getting dark: oh God, how will we ever reach that place?

But eventually we manage to slip away, and trudge along the road for an hour or two in the dark. When we finally reach the client's home, we are both distressed: it is one of the poorest hovels that either of us has ever seen. I reach into my bag, and discover that all of my warm, dry clothes are soaked with country liquor. I have to wash them right now, otherwise I'll never get rid of that stench! But then I'll have no warm clothes for this cold Himalayan night. An appropriate baptism, soaked in Garhwali hooch before I return to New Zealand for a couple of years. Sitting in this dirty, cramped hut, watching the clients discussing the ritual with Sacchu, I overhear them apologizing because they forgot to bring the yellow cloth, they forgot to bring the red cloth . . . it seems that I know more about this stuff than they do! The house is crawling with cockroaches, they're scuttling over everything: the offerings, the floor, my equipment, my clothes . . . The clients bring us some cold lentils and bread, and Sacchu and I exchange wary glances—the food looks awful, but we are so damned hungry! Just as we are about to start eating, a cockroach falls from the ceiling—plop!—into my soup. No food tonight, I guess . . . A few minutes later I feel something deep in my bowels. For the first time in eight months, I'm going to have an attack of diarrhea. The clients don't treat me in any special way; I'm just Sacchu's friend. He tells stories, the accomplished raconteur, while I sit quietly at his side. They haven't even asked me if I want a glass of water, they've hardly noticed me—and that fact gives me a little rush of pleasure.

Gurus as Agents

While doing the research for this book I cane to know several gurus very well indeed: visiting them in their homes, traveling with them to conduct rituals, appearing on stage with them at festivals, even inviting one of them to Heidelberg to help me translate and analyze the material I had collected. These men—and they are *always* men—are a remarkable lot. They are sought after by clients for various reasons, sometimes to officiate at auspicious and happy occasions, but more often to use their esoteric knowledge to relieve the client's suffering. For a client, the guru often represents the last chance to emerge from the darkness of illness and misfortune into the light of normal life.

From the very beginning I got along well with the gurus, and never had a serious disagreement with any of them. This remarkable sympathy has largely to do with the fact that gurus and ethnographers have so much in common. Most ethnographers enjoy few things more than traveling to new places and seeking to understand other people's dreams and hopes, their daily routines and struggles. The work is often very hard: the ethnographer must adjust to different kinds of food and clothing; sometimes he doesn't know where or if he will sleep; unexpected events require fast thinking and adjustment; he is constantly challenged to understand details of relationships between people whom he has never even met. Sometimes he sees (though he rarely experiences) great poverty and suffering. All of this is true of the gurus, too. During several months of the year they are constantly traveling from one client to another, and they often go days without sleep. Everyday comforts like cooked food, a warm bed, and clean clothes are scarce. Clients come from near and far with tales of suffering and need, begging the gurus to come to their aid. When the guru enters a village, he has to work like a detective, sorting out the relevant relationships among the people, and between the people and their gods (see "A Mother and Her Daughter," in chapter 6). But despite all these difficulties, the gurus love their work. Wandering from village to village over the steep mountain paths in the midst of winter, staying in the homes of different sorts of clients, even the desperately poor, while ministering to their spiritual needs—such things would hardly be attractive to most people, but for the gurus they represent freedom, adventure, and the thrill of the unknown.

Gurus are powerful agents. Just as the oracle is defined by his or her patiency with respect to the god, so the guru is defined by his agency. Indeed, this is what the term "guru" means—not a spiritual master but rather a "master of the spirits." The Guru may cause possession to occur in others, but he himself is never possessed—and this simple fact is fundamental for what it means to be a guru. One of the most uncanny experiences I ever had was when I saw the guru Darpal possessed and writhing on the ground like a serpent during his own shrine ritual. But in this case he was sponsoring the worship of his own family deity and was therefore the client and not the guru, so there was no contradiction in his behavior.

The guru is summoned in order to control spirits of affliction: to exorcize them, to turn their curses into blessings, to compel them to do his client's bidding. He must show no fear, he must be what is called *souverän* in German: that is, self-assured and in control of himself as well as the gods and spirits, otherwise he will forfeit his claims to power and authority. This quality of composure is particularly impressive, since the gurus deal so often with dangerous and frightening powers like ghosts, demons, and malignant spirits. Because they

spend so much time in this dark and threatening world, gurus need reliable methods for dealing with fear and spiritual danger. Guru Darpal taught me two such methods, both of which involved uttering a mantra into some sacred ash (*vibhuti/babhut*), which is then applied as needed. Here are my summaries of the methods, along with translation of the relevant mantras. (Darpal asked me not to reproduce the mantras themselves, which are secret.)

For the first mantra, one mixes cow manure (a holy substance) and red powder, burns it to ash, then holds it in the left palm and "stirs" it with the fingers of the right hand (the guru called this action *achaman*) while uttering a mantra into it. I copied the mantra from a handwritten manuscript in Darpal's possession. Rather unusually, it was written in standard Hindi rather than in the archaic Garhwali that is typical of such texts. It seemed to have been copied from a published source, though I have no idea what that source might have been.

> Indra's Armor of Protection (*indra kabac ka bargin*)
>
> Parikshit said, "Hey great Muni, please be merciful, and tell me how Indra defeated the demons and established his kingdom."
>
> Shri Shukhdevji said, "Narayana taught Indra the armor as follows. Whoever reads the armor mantra and then puts vermilion on his body, or writes the mantra on his limbs, that person cannot be harmed by any weapon, and whenever someone feels frightened, he should wash his hands and feet and do the *achaman*, sit with his face to the north, place the *jay*[26] and the eight-syllable mantra on his limbs and recite the twelve-syllable mantra:
>
> In the water, protect me from fish,
> In the underworld, protect me from the dwarf incarnation,
> In a fortress or in the jungle, hey Narsingh-ji, protect me!
> In a foreign land or in the mountains, Sri Ram-ji, protect me!
> On the path of yoga, brother Dattatreya, protect me!
> Protect me from the crimes of the gods, Sant Kumar!
> Ved Vyasji, protect me from the form of the ritual!
> Kalanki Bhagwan, protect me from *adharma*!
> May Govind, Narayan, Balabhadra, Madhusudan, Hrishikesh,
> Padam nam Gopinath, Damodar, Ishvar, Parameshvar, and
> whatever other names of god there are, protect my limbs and my
> senses twenty-four hours [*atho pahar*] a day.
> May the conch, discus, club, lotus, and Garuda of the lord of heaven
> protect me from numerous fears.

> "Hey king" [concludes Shri Shukhdevji], "this armor is the universal form [*vishvarupa*]."

Darpal told me that after reciting this mantra into the ash, one should then apply the ash to one's own forehead or to someone else's, or blow it on to them, and that this would make them safe. He said that this mantra was so powerful that he didn't fear ghosts or demons anymore. They might come from the cremation ground and listen from a distance, he said, but they would not approach very closely. The mantra made one fearless, he said, so that one "swelled like a lion" from its power, and he added that it was particularly effective for children affected by "wind" (*hava*). He also taught me the so-called *guruchoki* mantra, which is intended to purify the seat (*choki*) taken by the guru during a ritual. It is recited after the water purification mantra, and can also be used for children, especially those who have experienced a sudden fright.[27]

> *Shri om namo adesh*!
> *Adesh* to my mother, to my father, to my guru!
> Greetings [*namaskar*] to the mother of esoteric wisdom!
> The ash alone is the mother, the ash alone is the father.
> It gets rid of all faults [*dosh*].
> When the ash is applied, then injury strikes another.
> Lord of my soul, protect me!
> Guru Gorakh Rau,[28]
> Wherever the earth blossoms,
> Mother earth makes cow-dung there.
> Fire comes from this dry cow-dung.
> The first ash should go to the nine Naths.
> The second ash should go to the blooming lotus.
> The third ash should go to the three worlds.
> The fourth ash should go to the four worlds.
> The fifth ash should go to the five-named gods.
> Whoever laughs when they look at you,
> Break their teeth, oh guru!
> Take the sword of knowledge and destroy death!
> Strike it on the head!
> The Guru asks the *masani*[29] who lives apart,
> "What have you come for, *dakini*?[30]
> If you come here I will send you to the underworld.
> I will pin you with the *vajra*-nail![31]
> Destroy sorrow! Establish happiness!

Form me like the potter forms his pot!
Mother, make this house an immortal body!
Make it into a *vajra*-body!
Gorakh, give *siddhi* in every home!
Make my body like an immortal rock!
Protect the sixteen *pinda*[32] of my body!
Drink the ambrosia of milk and rice pudding;
Protect my body, Gorakh Vir!
Make my back strong!
Give me lungs strong as a bee's.
The *dakini* is tormenting everyone
Gorakh, you are like my mother,
Keep me like your own child!
Oh woman, a mine of seeds,
Give me the first body!
Whatever tank we bathe in,
Gorakh regards them as equal.
phor! phor! So Ishvar spoke the mantra.

Darpal taught me yet another mantra, which one recites into a mixture of red powder, yellow powder, black lentils and rice. He said this mantra could protect anyone, including oneself, for example, when walking after dark. He said that it would frighten away all ghosts. Sometimes, he said, the mantra is spoken by itself, without empowering any mixture of grains. If, during the performance of a ritual, one discovers that one cannot speak, it may be because one has been bewitched by another guru, in which case one can place the empowered mixture underneath one's seat, for self-protection.

The guru's matted locks are immortal,
His forehead shines like sun,
He always laughs,
He makes the eighty-eight Kalis dance
With the *doom-doom* sound of his guru's drum!
He summons Bhairav!
From the guru's hand,
The sixteen Radhikas dance,
The four *kshetrapal*[33] dance,
The man Auliya dances.
Guru Ganga,
Guru Bamvala,

> Guru Aradangi,
> Guru Arjun Gaud.
> The ash on his forehead,
> Broad as a mountain.
> He establishes a garland of heads,
> He establishes a seat of sandalwood,
> He does the ritual according to the rules.
> Say the mantra "*phor! phor!*" in the middle of the night!

It is important for the gurus to have such techniques to help them conquer their fear and maintain their self-control, their agency, their *souveränität*. The same purpose is served by their initiation ritual. All the gurus I know insist that in order to acquire true supernatural power, or *siddhi*, one must go to a cremation ground along with one or two friends, stationing them nearby in case something goes wrong, then enter the cremation ground alone and naked, draw a protective magic circle on the ground, and perform a ritual that summons Masan, the "King of the Cremation Ground." The aspirant sits inside the circle and waits, while Masan attempts all kinds of tricks to frighten him. Ghosts and wild animals appear, gale winds blow, there are noises, there is pleading from loved ones—but one must stay resolutely inside the magic circle and not go anywhere. Shortly before dawn, Masan appears with his two queens, and they offer three bowls to the aspirant, who must choose from them. One of the bowls contains boiled rice, which indicates success. Another contains water, which is neutral. The third bowl contains meat, and if the aspirant chooses it, he will die. Here is how guru Jagdish described it:

> If you want to generate *siddhi*, then you have to go to the burning ground on a new moon night. The best one around here is just below Baindoli, it is called Maindvari. There is so much *siddhi* there! If you want to make anything *siddh*, you can do it there. The burning-ground meditation [*ghat-sadhana*] . . . I did the burning-ground meditation there once, on a new moon night. A corpse had been burned, and the coals were still glowing. My father was my guru at that time. I came home in 1981, but he had gone lame in 1979, so he didn't come with me to the burning-ground. I brought a goat, the seven-grain mixture, all the other stuff. And I went there. It's a matter of life and death. And you see a <u>picture</u>. Just like a movie. If you sit there . . . There shouldn't be any noise, no liquor, none of that sort of thing . . . on a new moon night, when a corpse has just been burned there. And you should make your seat on exactly the place

where the corpse has been burnt. You must do it according to the rules. You have to be naked, not a stitch of clothing. And you have to protect yourself. No one else should be there. OK, if someone wants to watch, then they can watch from a distance. But there shouldn't be any noise: no coughing, no speaking, nothing

So once you're sitting there, you can easily watch the picture. You can see this and that. The goddess will show herself, and the gods will show themselves, and the ancestors too. And the king of the cremation ground comes on a chariot. He has a bowl of meat, one of his queens has a bowl of cooked rice, and one queen has a bowl of water. Before that, all kinds of people come to frighten you, but as long as you remain inside your magic circle, they can't harm you. Now as I said, there are two possibilities: you live or you die. They come and frighten you: they shout, they whistle and make noise, they pick up stones and throw them at you. One of them has a voice like a gunshot! Then they ask for their food: Some of them eat *ginjar* root, some eat other things. You have to toss it to them: "Take it! Eat it!" One of them eats the seven-grain mixture: You toss a handful to him and tell him to eat it. Some of them eat *ikadya ront*, some eat rice pudding, some eat roosters. But the goat-eater, the King of the burning ground, comes last, with his queens. And they put those three bowls in front of you. Not inside the magic circle—outside of it. Then they shuffle the three bowls. And if I am sitting there, then I have to look the other way, reach behind me, and touch one of the bowls with my left hand. If my hand touches the bowl of water, then "equal." You and I are equal. No one is the guru, no one is the disciple. If it touches the meat, then I'm finished. They take me away. But if my hand touches the rice, then I become the guru, and they are my disciples. And if I've made the magic circle correctly, then when I bring the bowl inside of it, it becomes ash. The boiled rice becomes ash. And that's where you obtain the *siddhi*. You'll see the goddess, the gods, the ancestors, the king of the cremation ground. You definitely have the feeling that they are all sitting beside you. And at the end, you sacrifice the goat to the king of the cremation ground. You call the man who has been waiting for you above, and he sacrifices the goat and offers it in the four directions. And then you leave with your *siddhi*. I did this when I was twenty-two years old.

My friends the gurus were constantly urging me to perform this ritual myself, so that I could obtain *siddhi* and become a practicing exorcist. I told

them that I was frightened to do so—what if I chose the meat? Whenever I had this conversation, I received the same answer: a chuckle and a friendly nudge, with the words, "You never choose the wrong bowl!" But still, I said, I was reluctant to do the ritual. "For one thing," I told them, "I don't really plan to practice this stuff. Just think how absurd it would be for a foreigner like me to set himself up as a guru!" But then they would assure me that I would be such a novelty that I would get lots and lots of clients. My final excuse was perhaps more honest. "Listen," I would say, "I'm not really sure if I believe in all of this or not. What if I do the ritual and no one shows up? Neither the king nor his queens? Then what?" The last time I had this conversation, with Jagdish in his home, he reluctantly admitted that if this was the case, then I should not be initiated.

Clearly the initiation ritual, like the mantras, is mainly about conquering one's fear. The idea is that a powerful guru will not be driven from his seat no matter how the spirits attempt to frighten him; he will control his intellect and his emotions no matter who tempts him; and in the end, he will compel the Lord of the Cremation Ground himself to appear and to offer the three bowls. The idea of the *parv*, the "right moment" to do such a thing, is crucial here. If the time is right and the guru does the ritual properly, he will choose the correct bowl and his agency over the gods will be established: he will become their guru, and they will thenceforth be his disciples.

The guru's power and authority can also be seen in the mantras he recites to control the gods, mantras that are full of commands and even threats. The guru does not request the beneficial deity to come, he *commands* him to do so. He does not politely ask the afflicting spirit to depart, he *orders* him to do so. Relations between gurus and the various ghosts, spirits and deities with whom they deal are often agonistic, and if the guru is competent he prevails as agent, turning these beings into his patients. A story told by Darpal illustrates the point:

> A teenage girl was attending the girls' school in Gopeshwar. One day she was posessed by a deity or a spirit of some kind. She began thrashing about, twining her arms and legs so tightly that no one could pry them apart, choking herself, blinking her eyes rapidly. No one could do anything about it. They called some doctors too, but they couldn't figure what the problem was. They just gave her injections, which didn't work. A doctor visited her in the place where she was living, but she exhibited no symptoms, so what could he do? In Gopeshwar, the *devta* had insisted that he was from her village, so her father brought her here on the bus. It took several people to drag her up the steep hill, kicking and thrashing, and she stayed there at her

> home for a day. From three o'clock in the afternoon until six o'clock in the evening she was like that. No one could pry her limbs apart. One old man came and tried to do so, and the *devta* possessing her was so strong that she flicked him across the room with her finger! So the father went to Mayapuri and consulted Nilam's wife,[34] who said that the girl was afflicted by Sayyid. They came and fetched me, and immediately I tried to find out if it was Sayyid, but it wasn't. I put *pithaim* on her forehead, and the *devta* immediately manifested [*avatar ho gaya*]. Her limbs twisted around, and her one good eye was looking at me, and she said, "Bring water! Bring water! Bring water!"[35] She drank a whole pail of water—just think how big a pail is! Her stomach was completely distended from so much water! But once she got better, her stomach was no longer swollen—who knows where all the water went? She was choking herself, and she only stopped when I touched her. I took her hand and put it under my thigh. The rest of her kept flapping around, but she couldn't move her hand from under my thigh, she couldn't twine her arms together. And I made the god speak! He said, "Guru-ji, I am from Gopeshwar. If you want me to let her go, you have to promise to worship me. You have to make my shrine [*mandap*]." He even touched his hand to my books and manuscripts, and said, "This book is mine. You must promise to worship me there." So I promised, and since then, the girl is at peace. It is a form of Kachiya. But now the father must agree to the great cost of the shrine ritual in Gopeshwar.

Darpal was the first and one of the most important gurus for me; someone whom I always called *guru-ji* with complete sincerity. He did not wish to talk much about his earlier life, and all I know for certain is that he had traveled a great deal, and that as a young man he was impressed by one of his uncles who was a guru, and decided that he, too, would take up this work. So he copied his uncle's manuscripts and became a kind of apprentice guru, along with his cousin Rupchand, who also did guru's work occasionally. Eventually Darpal developed a good reputation, so that when I came to know him, he had a regular (if modest) flow of clients. It was not enough to provide for the family though, and he also worked regularly as a carpenter and stonemason. He was a free and easygoing traveling companion, always referring to me as his son (though he was only perhaps fifteen years older than I). He enjoyed a shot or two of whiskey, after which he would become very loquacious and tell stories about his work as a guru. His style was happy, confident, and rather boastful—typical of local men.

I met Darpal at the very beginning of my research, when his son Sacchu had just returned from Bombay. Under his father's supervision, Sacchu was working hard to become a guru himself. I became a regular visitor at their house, often staying for days at a time before going off with father and son to perform some ritual or other. Darpal's greater knowledge and experience was complemented by Sacchu's superlative musical talents, and together they made an effective team. I once gave them a photo I had taken of the two of them, father and son, sitting together during Makkhan Lal's puja (described in Chapter 1). The last time I visited them in Mayapuri, it was still hanging on the wall. In the photo (figure 4.2) Darpal smiles broadly, as if he is about to tell one of his stories. He is slightly built but very fit, wearing a Garhwali cap, with his *huraki* resting in his lap. Next to him sits Sacchu, who had a thick beard at that time, with drumsticks in hand, looking into the camera with a serious, faintly sad expression—as though he expected to hear something disappointing at any moment.

Sacchu

How can I adequately describe Sacchu? A romantic dreamer? A talented musician? A charming rogue? A loving husband? An irresponsible father? He was all of those things, and more. When I first asked him his name, he replied "Satyeshwar Himalaya." It was his stage name, and one that was intended to avoid betraying his low-caste origins. Sacchu had considerable personal charm, and even though he was constantly falling into debt, getting into trouble with the law, and being caught in various compromising situations, he was normally able to use his charm to extricate himself—at least until the next crisis came along. Of all the gurus I met, Sacchu was the one with whom I spent the most time, not only watching him perform rituals but also sitting in my room in Nauti, day after day, listening to cassettes, watching videos, making notes and translations, stopping for a cigarette or a cup of tea, going back to work until the caretaker Hayat Singh called us for lunch, then working for a few hours more. He was my most reliable assistant, helping to collect much of the information in this book. Near the end of my research I asked him to tell me his own life story, and several months later he posted it to me, written in Hindi. I cannot confirm its veracity since Sacchu, like his father, was a notorious yarn-spinner, and moreover by the time he produced this document he knew exactly what kind of material I was looking for. So all I can say for certain is that this brief autobiography represents a kind of idealized self-portrait, an image of the sort of life-story that, according to Sacchu, a low-caste guru could or should have, which implies among other things, a story in which the guru's heroic agency is prominent. Here, then, is Sacchu's autobiography as he wrote it in 2004:

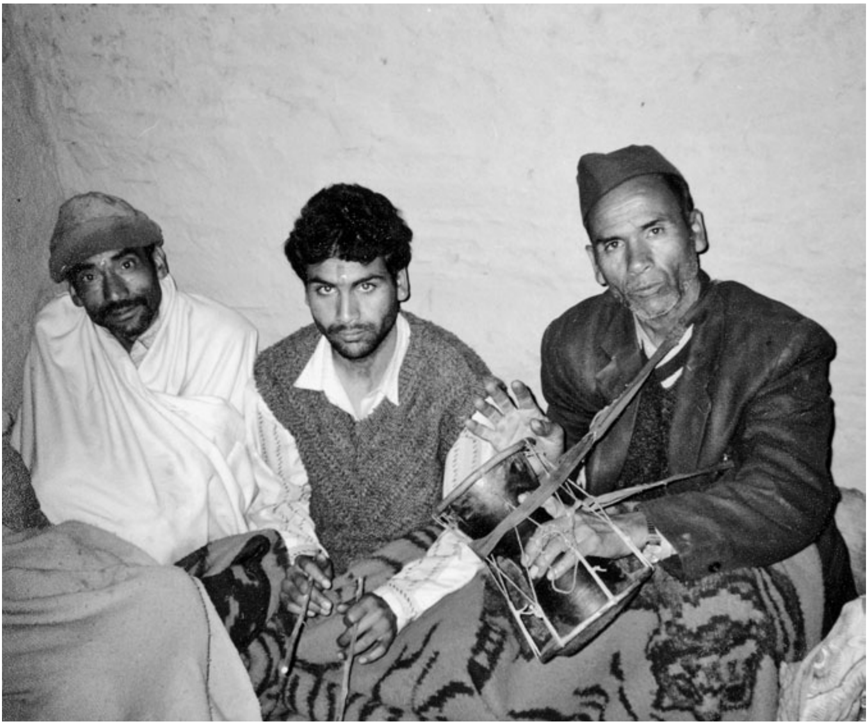


FIGURE 4.2. The gurus Darpal [on the right] and Sacchu [in the middle] (photo by William S. Sax).

My name is Sacchu. I live in Mayapuri village. I was born in 1962. My home was weak from the beginning, and poverty was our constant companion. Once I was very sick indeed—it was when my whole family was living together in Karanprayag. After that we returned home. We worshiped our family *devta*, and asked that our family remain peaceful [saying,] "Lord, be like a chariot-driver for us."

I was stubborn from childhood, and not easy to get along with. My honored father[36] was usually away working, and my younger brother and I lived at home with our mother. I was the king of the house, and nothing could be done with me—I did whatever I felt like. . . . All the children in the village were my friends, and the main reason was that my father was a guru. In those days the only school around here was the one in Udampur. We started our school there and we ended it there, too. Every day when we came home from school, we would gather in an old tree that was hollow inside, just big enough for us to fit into. We would use our writing slates for *thali*s and our *golakya* [?] for Huraki drums, and Dinesh would play

the *thali* and I would play the drum. We didn't really know the songs, we just sang! But I knew that when my honored father sang such songs, he would call out, "Samsani Aughar!" and "Murda Khola!" and so I did, too, and I frightened all of my friends—they would squeal loudly and look at me. We continued like this for some time, and eventually we stopped going to school. I mean, the other children kept going to school but Dinesh, Bhrigu, I, and about ten other boys just sat there every day and gossiped. One day we went to school after having missed several days, and the Master-ji beat us badly. On that day, after we were allowed to go home, we sent Shambhu to get some pomegranates, and told him we would sit and wait for him until he came back with them. He climbed up the tree and I thought I would scare him a little bit. I only made a tiny sound—"hu! hu! hu!"—but when he heard it, he fell to the ground! We were all terrified, and my friends turned on me and said that if I didn't make him better right away I would be skinned alive, and that what I had done was really stupid! And so I told them that I would heal him, but I wouldn't play with them anymore! I picked up four stones, and just held them in my fists. My mind was going "tap! tap! tap! tap!" and I was looking at my friend lying there unconscious on the ground, and thinking, "*Now* what do I do? If I don't fix him, I'll be beaten!" I decided to circle those four stones around him and toss them in the four directions, and I was thinking that he wouldn't really be cured, and that I would have to run away, but nevertheless I picked them up and circled them over him—and he jumped up, grabbed his slate, and ran off to a corner where he sat quietly, looking at all of us! After a while he got better, and the others began to return, eating their pomegranates, and I thought, "Now I'll show them a little drama." What did I do? There was a small pool there, full of water from the monsoon rains, and I thought that if I told them one of our friends had fallen in, they would feel compassionate. I threw my clothes, my school slate, and so on into the pool, thinking that it would look just like a person who had fallen in. I called my friends, but as soon as they saw me they turned and went the other way, and I thought "I'm not going to talk to those bastards anymore! I've ruined my clothes—my mother will beat me now!" All my friends went home while I stayed there, drying my clothes.

After that, all of them would go to school and come home together, but I always went alone. This went on for some time. I would sit under that tree and when I heard them coming I would get up and

go home, singing my songs. But what could they do? None of them knew any of the gods' songs. Finally they decided they would try to get me back into their group by bribing me with toffee. After school was out, each of them went to Pitambar's shop and bought a piece of candy, and they all sat waiting for me beneath that tree. When I came along they grabbed me and said that they had made a mistake, and asked me to forgive them. They said that it just didn't seem right without me, and they promised not to fight with me anymore. I played coy for a while, but then allowed myself to be convinced. We gathered beneath and tree and they asked me to play a song. I played a ghost song and Shambhu Lal began to cry—he was possessed by a ghost! We were all shocked at what had happened to him, but we folded our hands in supplication and calmed him down, and when we got home, everyone said, "Shambhu was possessed by a ghost today! Sacchu played on his slate and sang a ghost song! Sambhu was possessed, and we were all surprised! How did Sacchu learn this kind of song at such a young age?"

So they started talking about me in the village and I was happy. Now we began to sing songs every day in the village, and as soon as we would start, all the village women would gather there, and they would praise me, saying "What a nice voice he has!" Slowly, I learned to play the *huraki*, and I accompanied my father and played the *thali*, and I listened attentively to the songs, to hear how my father played them. At night I would sing them to myself, and pretty soon I knew quite a lot. I repeated those songs day and night in my heart, and I didn't pay much attention to my studies.

Once, Madho the Weaver's *devta* was dancing in a nearby village, and I went to see the spectacle. His son and I were in the same class at school, and because he was my friend he said to me, "You stay here until the end of the puja—I need a girl!" I was shocked by what he said, but I played the *thali* anyway. Soniya was the guru and he was quite young at that time, with a very nice voice. I listened to him attentively and didn't forget a single word. When the spectacle was over they bade farewell to the guru and there was lots of meat and cash. They gave him *pithaim*, and they honored him with *duba* grass and *kunja* grass. Then the guru gave *pithaim* to all of them and put the grass on their heads. And when he did that, they gave him money, and touched his feet, and asked for a blessing. When he was ready to leave, one person grabbed his drum bag, another took his shoulder bag, and they went to see him off. Some people

even began crying, and I saw how devotedly they served him. I used to go with my father and I thought perhaps they were just acting that way because it was my father, but now I realized that all the gurus were honored in this way, and I thought, "I too will become a guru. There is no greater respect and honor than this!" And after that I would go straight to wherever the gods were dancing, and sit next to the guru and play the *thali*. I learned all the rhythms and the mantras, and I got to know all the gurus, and they started to recognize me, too.

One day the gods were dancing in the home of my neighbor Rakesh, and they waited and waited for my honored father, but he didn't come. The guests had all come, and they waited until evening, but father still didn't come, and so finally they said, "Let Sacchu play! He's the guru's son—let him do the worship for us!" So they came to summon me. It was about 10 o'clock in the evening, and we had finished our evening meal and were about to go to sleep. I was quite young then, and unmarried, and was just sitting and talking with some of my friends. Suddenly we were startled by a knock at the door, and from the other room my mother called out, "Who is there outside? Open the door!" They came in and we saw that it was Rakesh. As soon as he entered, he asked my mother where I was, and I called out and said that I was in the front room, and he told my mother to summon me, which she did. Then he told me to grab my *huraki* drum, and come and make the gods dance. "You're the son of a guru, after all, and I am a guru's brother. We will join hands and offer incense, and if the *devta* dances, then fine, and if he doesn't, we'll worship him later." My mother was very happy, and said, "Go—make the gods dance! You've been singing their songs every day!"

I thought, "Should I go, or not? I have to start the *devta*'s arena right from the beginning!" I was frightened, and embarrassed as well—everyone would be there! How could I open my mouth in front of them? But then my uncle grabbed me and said, "Come along! Do as I say!" So I picked up my drum and went along, though my heart was faint with anxiety. But I had faith in god, and that everything would work out all right. As soon as I reached their verandah they sat me on the guru's seat, and my heart began to pound with fear—I was only fifteen or sixteen years old at the time. They put *pithaim* on my forehead and I got even more scared—Rakesh's father-in-law, who had arrived that day, said, "It's gotten very late—let's get started!" Everyone was sleeping, and I thought, "It's good if all the villagers

have gone to sleep." I was so embarrassed, you see—I didn't want them to watch me!

I looked at my watch and saw that it was past 11 p.m. I took out the *huraki* and tightened it, and as soon as I began to play, people left their homes and began to come. Within ten or fifteen minutes the whole verandah was filled with people. Until then I was just playing the warmup, but now everyone came to see the spectacle, and I was thinking, "How can I open my mouth in front of all the villagers?" I had been playing the drum for quite a while, and everyone had been thinking, "Now he will start singing. . . . *now* he will start singing . . ." but until then I hadn't opened my mouth. They all began to laugh, and I stopped playing. They were thinking, "What's he doing now?" and when I did nothing, they started saying, "Look, there's no need to be embarrassed in front of us. We are your fellow-villagers! If you get embarrassed in front of us, then how will you ever play in front of outsiders? You won't ever become a guru like this! Look at your father—he doesn't get embarrassed!" Then my grandmother said, "The one who is shy, his karma says good-bye [*jisne lage sharam, uske phute karam*]. Don't be shy, grandson—play the *huraki*! Sing the songs! I give you my oath, grandson!" Rakesh was sitting next to me and poking me with his finger, saying, "Speak! Speak!" He really hassled me, and finally I began to sing. First I sang Bhairav's songs, and everyone got possessed because I had a good voice, and I could play the *huraki* well, because I came from a good family. I didn't really know the songs at that time, and I didn't know the written versions at all. So I sang however I could, and the *devta* recognized me as a guru, and I gained some confidence, and my color returned, and everyone was happy to see this, and they began calling out to me, "Guru! Guru!" I was happy, and the *devta* was satisfied, and then the clients said, "Now worship the *devta*," so I got up and left with them. I asked them "Where is the shrine of Narsingh?" and they said, "The shrine of Narsingh is here, and Bhairav's is there, and next to it is the shrine of Aughar Kali." And then I resolved in my mind, "From today I will do the work of a guru. Oh God, please forgive whatever mistakes I make!" I did the shrine ritual that night, and after that I worshiped the *bahiyal*s, and then the client said, "Guru, what should we do with this goat?" and I said, "Father always feeds the sacrificial goat to the guests, but I don't know what your opinion is about this—you tell me!" So they fed the goat and the cock to their guests. Next morning it was time for my farewell. They had sacrificed three goats, and so

I received three forequarters, two shares of organ meat, and one head, plus fifty rupees. When they escorted me to my door, I felt very proud that I had brought so much money home, along with the meat. That evening, as I was cutting the meat, my father came home and asked where it had come from, and my mother told him that I had brought it. When he asked how, she told him that I had made Rakesh's *devta* dance, and that I had worshiped him too, and they had given the head and the forequarter, along with fifty rupees as a parting gift. When he heard this, my father was very happy! And so I began to improve my skills as a guru, and to learn how to create the special atmosphere [*abhau vatavaran*], but I also saw that no one was able to create the same atmosphere as my father. And because I continued to accompany my father, I learned quite a bit.

Then one day my father went to live in Bombay. I had also lived there, but when I came home I stayed here, and concentrated on learning to be a guru. And because my father wasn't at home, I had many opportunities to do a guru's work. I learned a lot by doing this work, but I had still not acquired *siddhi*, and I kept thinking, "How can I acquire it?" Now at that time, in Samdamaum Village, the ghost of a dead person was wandering around in front of Karam Lal's brother, and sometimes things went well for them, but sometimes things went badly. One night, his wife went outside to pee, and she saw an image [*pratima*], and when she came back inside she was blind—her eyes would not open. Karam Lal was very agitated—his wife had been fine, and now suddenly she was blind! He woke everyone and told them to sit by him, and they watched over that woman all night long. Next morning some of them went to do a consultation, others went to the astrologer. And both the oracle and the astrologer confirmed that a Muslim spirit was possessing one of the daughters of the household, and that was why they were being troubled. And this spirit was not a new one—he had been there since the beginning, and he stayed around from seven in the evening until four in he morning, and those on whom his gaze fell would be sliced by his saw! That's what had happened to the woman, and the oracle said that his puja would have to be done at night by a great sorcerer [*sabari*], who would make an image of him. This sorcerer would have to make two small cots [*khatola*], carry them to the cremation ground on his shoulders, perform his spiritual exercises [*sadhana*], and then do the puja. There shouldn't be too many people, and they should stay silent while the guru did his meditation. When

I heard Karam Lal say all of this, I got worried, and thought, "How can I possibly do this? How can I go to do spiritual exercises at the cremation ground?" But then I realized that perhaps my time had come to obtain *siddhi*.[37]

It was the new moon night. Mangi Lal from Udampur and Makkhan Lal from my village both accompanied me. We picked up another three friends on the way to the cremation ground, so that there were six of us. We went there and made tea, and then I prepared my seat. Before doing the meditation I went to Karam Lal's house and prepared the *changtira* [the torn workbaskets on which *yantra*s are drawn]. Then I went to the *auda* stone to do the *kas puja* [see "*Kas puja*," in chapter 3]. I sacrificed the animal, then returned and lit a wick in a copper vessel. I brought the god back from there, told my companions to remain standing, put the god in the shrine, lit all the lamps, and then returned. We must have left Dharampur for the cremation ground sometime around 2 a.m., and as soon as we reached there, we made bread and sweet offerings [*rot naved*], and I asked them for one piece of bread, and I began to get my *siddhi*. I followed the ritual technique, asked for one betel nut and one cock, and obtained my *siddhi*. I did the ritual, obtained my *siddhi*, and then I had confidence that now I could do the work of a guru. While I was doing the ritual, just as I was about to sacrifice the goat and the cock, two men dressed in white stood in front of me, and everyone saw them! After that I sacrificed the goat and cooked it, and just as we were about to eat the meat, those two men came and stood before us again, and one of our companions said, "Who are you, brothers?" and when they heard that, they raced off toward the ravine, and then I knew that on this day I had acquired my *siddhi*.

After that I went many places doing puja, and everyone talked about me. Now everyone praises me, because I play the *dhol*—I am an expert in this as well. And when I do so everyone is pleased with me, and all the gods dance at my slightest command, and they all incarnate at once, so that I am well respected in the whole area. By the grace of these gods I have met many good people, and my wife is pregnant. Whether it will be a boy or a girl is in the hands of god, but we do pray that it will be a boy. All *maya* is in the hands of god, and we have faith in him. Here is where the story ends.

This autobiographical narrative begins with Sacchu's childhood, and emphasizes his stubbornness and willfulness. He was "king of the house" and would

not submit to anyone's authority. During the incident with his friend who had fallen from the tree, he displays his inherent agency, his powers as a guru. He uses his knowledge of the gods' songs to his own advantage, manipulating his friends and establishing his dominance over them. He makes no bones of the fact that he was motivated by a search for fame, and that he was happiest when "everyone in the village start[ed] talking about" him. When he comes to understand the respect and service that is accorded a successful guru, he resolves to become one himself: once again, he stresses the importance of personal agency. He studies to be a guru under his father, and the narrative seems convincingly honest when he admits his own fears at his first public performance. He continues to practice, following in his father's footsteps, and when the time for his initiation comes, he fears it—but perseveres and acquires the guru's *siddhi*, even frightening away the two "men in white." At the end of the story, he mentions the fact that he was incorporating the *dhol* drum into his performances (I was there at the time and observed as he introduced this aesthetic innovation). In the entire story, there is not the slightest hint of subordination to the gods. Rather, Sacchu presents himself as a successful guru, and the *devta*s are his patients, subject to his power. But life does not always correspond to our hopes and dreams. In his account Sacchu does not speak of how he and his wife, Sullu, suffered from their inability to produce a son. One son had been stillborn, and they were desperately trying to produce another. I accompanied them several times to local oracles, and watched as they tried various rituals to help them obtain a son. Their marriage suffered, and Sacchu's parents blamed Sullu for her sonlessness. As Sacchu indicates at the end of his autobiography, she was pregnant again near the end of my fieldwork. After I left the field he sent his written life story to me, and several months later Sullu finally did give birth to a son, but he died almost immediately—and so did she, a few weeks later.

Jagdish Prasad

Pandit Jagdish Prasad Sati was one of three Brahman brothers living in the predominantly Rajput village of Kalyari, above Nauti. He was one of the best-known gurus in the area, with a very large clientele that he had inherited from his father, who was even more famous as a guru. By the time I met him, I had come to realize that the cult of Bhairava was by no means an exclusively Dalit cult. Even Kacchiya, the most "Dalit-centric" of all the god's forms, is occasionally worshiped by Brahman priests.

Jagdish himself was a slight man, unfailingly well-groomed and dapper (figure 4.3), and could always be found around five o'clock in the afternoon in Ram Prasad's tea shop where the path to Kalyari village left the road—unless he



FIGURE 4.3. Jagdish Sati (photo by William S. Sax).

was away somewhere, chasing ghosts. He was soft-spoken but very congenial, and he certainly enjoyed a drink and a smoke, like all the other gurus I met. He was a family man, and one or two visits to his home were enough to show me what a harmonious family he had. After the death of his father, he had worked hard to ensure that his younger brothers finished school and were employed. He wore his authority as head of the household lightly, and the family had not "split," as is increasingly common these days. Whenever I visited them they were unfailingly polite, hospitable, and easy-going.

But when we went ghost-busting, his demeanor changed. The freedom of the guru traveling from house to house suited him, and he was a natural therapist. His style was clear and self-confident; he always spoke gently but penetratingly to his clients, urging them to express their problems and their feelings; encouraging the family to externalize their emotions and leave them behind; never raising his voice, even when uttering dire threats and curses to ghosts and demons. Jagdish spoke to supernatural beings more often than other gurus did: instructing them, ordering them to desist, telling them to protect the family.

Of all the gurus I met, Jagdish had the most developed aesthetic sense. This expressed itself in two ways. In the first place, his Sanskrit was beautiful and crisp, *klishth* as they say in Hindi, and in the second place, his sense of color and design was superb. His mantras were bright and symmetrical, and he always arranged the plants, flowers, and candles for his rituals in the most pleasing way, even when there was almost no one (other than the demons per-

haps) to see them. When he came to my home in Heidelberg in September 2005, he conducted a purification ceremony to which we invited numerous friends, and they were all impressed by his aesthetic touch.

Jagdish referred to his work as "*tantra, mantra*, and *yantra*." He said that this was a long tradition in his family. Originally, he said, they were from a place called Devasthan, on the Garhwal–Kumaon border. Three Sati lineages had settled in the immediate area: one in Ujjalpur on the Karanprayag–Gair Sain Highway, his own family in Kalyari, and one higher up, in Kirsal. "I used to study at the traditional school," said Jagdish,

> and I was really immersed in Sanskrit. I hated the smell and taste of meat, I couldn't stand any of these things. And that's why I didn't want to take over my father's profession. One day when I was studying in the school, my respected father came. He was going to Koth village, to do a buffalo sacrifice for Goril. He told me to come there and join him. I was only twelve or thirteen years old at the time. He gave me his manuscript to read, and I joined him there and saw everything. The animals that were sacrificed—the goat, the fish, the crawdads—the books with *yantra*s in them, and so forth. People said to my father that he should teach me the guru's knowledge, and he answered that this was why he had sent me to the Sanskrit school. But I took a mental vow [*samkalp*] never to do this work—I was disgusted by all these things! I only wanted to do pure [*sattvik*] things. And that's when I left the school and went to Delhi. I was only about fourteen years old then. First I worked in a hotel, and then a factory, but I lost my job and was so poor I didn't even have a pair of sandals. But a man from Gairoli Village helped me. He got me a job in a restaurant, then in a steel factory in Faridabad. In about 1978 my job became permanent there. I was earning nearly Rs. 850 per month including extras, and I thought that I was the king of the world!
>
> Now my landlord had no sons, but only one daughter. She fell in love with me and they all wanted me to marry her, so much that they even fed me *kabar* (see note 8) so that I forgot about my own family, and thought only of them. I actually moved in to their building and began to take my meals there. The girl and I were in love with each other, but then my sister wrote to my respected father, saying that something was wrong with me, and he came to Faridabad. One day my sister said to me, "Our respected father has come!" Six years had passed and I had not returned home. I hadn't seen any of them even once! I went to visit my father for only a short while, not even five

minutes. But he immediately understood what had happened. He uttered some kind of mantra into his fist and circled it around my head. A day or so later he left, because he had to see some of his clients.

Immediately I began to miss my family and to look forward to going home. I kept thinking, “When will I go home? When? When?” I felt disgusted with that girl and her parents; I didn’t even want to see their faces! I started cooking my own food, or I would go to my sister’s flat in the same building. The girl’s father tried to persuade me to resume eating with them, but I wouldn’t. I lived there another three months, and then I got a message that my respected father had had an accident. He had fallen somewhere in Nagpur and injured his back, and he was lame. I showed the letter to the girl’s father, and he said, “There’s the cupboard: take as much money as you want. I won’t even look. But my daughter will go with you to your village.”

I didn’t take a single coin from that cupboard. Nor did I take any money from the factory. I left on January 25, 1981, with 200 rupees in my pocket. I didn’t even take the wages that were due me on the 27th. From the Rs. 200 it took a certain amount to get home, plus I had to buy sweets for everyone, and so forth. When I reached home, I had only seventy rupees left. The girl’s father had said to his driver, “Take him as far as he wants.” So we drove to Rishikesh, and he saw the jungle, and asked how far we had to go, and I said “One day, two days, three days, and then onward by foot!” The driver lost his nerve. I made a deal with him: I told him that he should tell the girl’s father that *she* had lost her nerve, and not that I had deserted her. And that’s what we did! I told them to take their time on the way back, to make the story convincing. They returned, and I went on to Karanprayag.

The 28th of January, 1981. My respected father was sick and lying there on his cot. The buffaloes had stopped giving milk, everything was in a terrible state. It was a black time [*akal*]. We ate vegetables without oil, we drank soybean tea, we had no sugar, nothing. The colors of our sandals didn’t match, our trousers were covered with patches. Everyone forgot us; we had no guests; no one asked after us. Then that rich man came with his daughter to Karanprayag, and began asking where Kalyari was, but no one knew—they had never been there. But he wrote a letter, in fact he wrote many letters, one after the other—he even threatened to prosecute me! But I ignored it all.

Now, I had refused to do any of this *tantra mantra*. I had already said so to my uncle. But when I had all this trouble, no one would

> help me: neither the villagers nor my relatives nor my friends. My father was sick for nearly five years—he couldn't even stand up. I started working as a laborer: repairing walls, building houses. But there was an eighty-year-old Harijan in our village, Radha the Carpenter, and he was afflicted by the *chhal*. He came to our house one day and asked my respected father to either heal him, or to send me to do so. On the day before the ritual, my respected father taught me the mantra for worshiping the *chhal*. I went next day to do the *chhal puja*. Radha had called four Rajputs to cook the food. Afterwards he gave me 12 rupees: 10 rupees for the ritual fee [*dakshina*] and one rupee each for the *chhal puja* and the *chhaya puja*. A hundred pounds [*sava man*] of rice, a hundred pounds of flour, carrot pudding, bread, rice pudding, the goat's head and forequarter! When I took it all home, I thought, "No one is my equal!" I got all this stuff—money, rice, flour, sweets, bread, pudding, meat! Now, I don't know who gave that *chhal* to me, first and last. My first puja was not to the goddess, not to any god. It was for nothing but a *chhal* from a ravine! But it's gotten me from that *chhal* to this *chhal*. It has shown me all kinds of places. It's that little *chhal* who has shown me so much—all the fifteen districts of Garhwal! And to this day I can't say who it was. Was it God? Was it my lineage deity? Was it my fate? I can only say that it must have been my fate—but I don't remember its name.
>
> So I came from Radha the carpenter's puja, and the local Rajputs had made the food, and my respected father got his meat. It's hard, when you are in the habit of eating meat, to go without it for so long. He was so happy that he ate it raw! And at the very last he said, "Son, you can to this work—you have my blessing!"

I began this chapter by arguing that it is ethnocentric to assume that agency is limited to human "individuals," and undertook to illustrate my point by comparing oracles and gurus, who are differentiated precisely in terms of their distinctive relations of agency and patiency with respect to local *devta*s. Clearly, to be an oracle is to subordinate one's agency to that of the possessing *devta*. Indeed, the oracles' agency is so dependent on that of the *devta*s that they become mere vessels for them while the *devta*s "dance" in their bodies—yet even this relationship is not utterly devoid of agency. On the contrary, we saw how Suraj Singh strove mightily with the *devta* who possessed him and his son, how he threatened and resisted him. The same is true of Gaurja Mai, a competent and self-assured woman who not only sought to exercise her agency against the men of her family, but even against the goddess. But in both cases the god

proved to be the superior agent. Gaurja Mai knew that ultimately she would be unable to resist the *devi*, and that once she was chosen, there was little she could do to extricate herself from this role. Ultimately she had to submit to the *devi*'s superior agency. And her entire experience, her interpretation of that experience, her subsequent actions—all of this was predicated on the reality of the supernatural agent.

The relationship of the guru to the *devta* is much more agentive. This became clear to me when I traveled with the gurus and observed their healing practices, their self-confidence, and their therapeutic skills. Certainly their clients did not doubt the gurus' efficacy. Having invested much time and money in seeking out a guru and retaining him for the ritual, they were hardly about to question his agentive powers. As the gurus see it, these powers largely derive from their initiation ritual. When it is successful, the guru obtains *siddhi*, and Masan and his queens—and by extension all the other local *devta*s—become his disciples. That is why, when a *devta* manifests during a ritual, one of the first things he usually does is to approach the guru and touch his drum. The guru responds by reaching out and blessing him by touching his head.

Does this mean that the guru has a monopoly on healing agency? Of course not! Oracles also exhibit agency, as the stories of Suraj Singh and Gaurja Mai show. The guru's mantras have agency (they protect him), and so do his books of spells, and the healing substances he makes, such as the ashes he empowers and distributes to the afflicted. Healing agency is *always* distributed in networks, among agents that are nonhuman as well as human, individual as well as collective. This applies not only to ritual healing, but also to psychotherapeutic and biomedical healing. Agency is not exclusively a property of the doctor, the analyst, or the priest. It is also a property of the medications administered, the gods who afflict the patient with disease or help with its removal, the patient who agrees to wear the talisman or take the medicine, the circle of family and friends who confirm the diagnosis and participate in the cure—the list goes on and on. Indeed, the problem with the concept of distributed agency lies not in identifying the nodes of the network, but in limiting them.

To say that agency is distributed in networks is not a radical claim, it is merely a truism. A much more radical claim is that the *devta*s have agency too, that they are part of the agentive network. This is of course absurd from a conventional social science perspective, according to which *devta*s don't exist, being only symbols of power relations, reflections of social structures, or ideological resources for personal advancement. The ethnographic literature contains dozens of examples of this sort of argument. Prominent versions are Taussig's (1988 [1980]) claim that the devil symbolizes nascent capitalist forms of economic organization, Turner's (1968) argument that supernatural affliction

reflects tensions in social organization, and Lewis's much-discussed (1989) thesis that possession cults are (among other things) a means for marginal people to express their frustration as well as to obtain a measure of power and influence. As Schömbucher (2006) has pointed out, most social scientists cannot accept the idea that external beings temporarily inhabit the bodies of humans, and so when they are confronted with possession phenomena, they typically ask, "What *really* happens when someone is possessed?" Pursuing such an argument, it might be suggested that people choose to become oracles as a strategy for personal gain, or that the gurus manipulate the beliefs of their clients for their own empowerment. But this would fly in the face of the observations I made, and it would contradict the experiences reported by oracles and gurus. I have little doubt that most of the oracles did not seek their calling. I believe that in most cases they truly suffered from it, just as they reported. And no matter how much I tried, I could never get the gurus to admit the slightest doubt about the reality of the *devta*s. In any case, nonhuman agents are crucial for the functioning of the system, which would lose its coherence without them. People assume that such agents exist, and they act in accordance with these beliefs, often investing considerable amounts of time and material resources in rituals to appease them. To that extent, the *devta*s are authentic social agents, essential parts of a network of healing agency.

5

Rituals of Family Unity

In many cultures, the typical object of ritual healing is a group and not an individual. This is certainly the case in Chamoli District. From beginning to end, ritual healing practices focus on the family and its unity. In oracular consultations, for example, the oracle nearly always asks, “Is the family united?” If the client answers “No,” then the oracle has a clue that the affliction has something to do with family discord. In such cases, one of the next questions is always, “*Can* the family be united?” and if the client still says “No,” then the oracle knows that it is probably a case of magical aggression within the family—a topic that will be discussed in chapter 7. On the other hand, if the client says that the family can indeed be united, the oracle often prescribes a healing ritual that obliges it to pull together and cooperate closely. Funds must be collected, the guru summoned, sacrificial animals purchased, ritual supplies such as lamps and oil and colored powder purchased, rare and more hard-to-find ritual items collected from the forest or the river, the house cleaned, food and drink prepared, along with a hundred other tasks, large and small. Everyone contributes in a way that is appropriate to his or her gender, age, and position in the family. Close kin who have been absent for months or even years return to the village, while nearby friends and relatives gather to participate in the ritual and the feast that often follows. Family unity is emphasized, strengthened, and created anew in the preparation for, as well as in the performance of, the ritual.

Tension and strife within the family often lead to physical and psychological affliction. Quarrels over land, jealousy at another's success, abuse and exploitation of young wives, conflict between the generations, pressure on young people to do well in school, demands from newly married couples to have children—these forms of intrafamilial tension emerge regularly in oracular consultations, and therefore they often appear in the pages of this book. Such negative feelings are frequently regarded as the root *cause* of affliction: they lead one family member to curse another, and illness and misfortune are attributed to this curse. They are also understood to be the *symptoms* of affliction: As this chapter will show, many visitors to oracles complain of family disharmony, and they want the oracle to reveal its underlying causes. Feelings of jealousy, anger, rivalry, and so forth are therefore both causes and symptoms of affliction, and so in the very act of cooperating and working together to perform a ritual, a family begins to heal itself. Family unity is thus not only a ritual principle, it is also a therapeutic principle. As a ritual principle, it is a necessary condition for performing the ritual in the first place, and as we shall see below, it is embodied and performed at several points during the ritual. As a therapeutic principle, family unity is taken to be the result of a successful healing ritual, and a sign of health. Finally, it is a moral principle, the violation of which can have deadly effects, as we will see in chapter 7.

The centrality of the family, both in concepts of health and illness and in healing practices of various kinds, has been noted by several other ethnologists working on ritual healing in South Asia. It is a thread running through Nabokov's (2000) study of healing rituals in Tamil Nadu, for example, and is central to Skultans' (1987) interpretation of healing temples in Maharashtra. Kakar, too, concludes his study of Balaji temple by noting that

> The underlying values of the traditional temple healing . . . stress that faith and surrender to a power beyond the individual are better than individual effort and struggle, that the source of human strength lies in a harmonious integration with one's group, in the individual affirmation of the community's values and its given order, in his obedience to the community's gods and the cherishing of its traditions (1982: 88).

All of this has important implications for Hindu notions of personhood, and for the relation of Hindus to their families, their castes, and their society. Such questions have been at the center of the ethnology of South Asia for several decades. As is well known, Louis Dumont (1970) argued that there is no place for the individual in the ideology of caste, which he took to be the defining feature of Indian society. The "individual" was subordinated to the whole, and

the whole was conceived by Dumont in structuralist terms as being composed exclusively of relations, primarily between the various castes. The person living in such a society was *Homo hierarchicus*, and was explicitly contrasted with the individualistic *Homo equalis* of the West. Although McKim Marriott and his circle of "ethnosociologists" at the University of Chicago were highly critical of Dumont's approach, they agreed that "the individual" was an inappropriate category of analysis for Hindu society and that "individualism" was an artifact of Western ideology, deriving from Western historical experience, rather than the universal category it is sometimes assumed to be.[1] Basing their arguments on detailed ethnographic fieldwork as well as the learned traditions of India, they argued that Hindu persons are best conceived as "dividuals," that is, "unique composites of diverse subtle and gross substances . . . divisible into separate particles that may be shared or exchanged with others" (Marriott and Inden 1977: 232).

And yet there does not seem to be any dearth of (sometimes rather colorful) "individuals" in India, as anyone who has spent much time there can attest. Indians often exhibit and even value the qualities of personal uniqueness, volition, and achievement that are associated with "individualism." The ethnologist Mattison Mines has written about this issue (M. Mines 1994), arguing that there is indeed an Indian concept of individualism, although it differs in important ways from that of the West. We have already seen, in chapter 4, that the gurus are characterized by agency, independence, a gregarious sociality, and a desire for fame. Are these not the characteristics of "individuals"?

One must be careful here to distinguish between individualism as an ideology or a value on the one hand, and as a personal style or an attitude toward life on the other. When Dumont argued that there was a fundamental difference between Indian hierarchy and European individualism, he was not making any claims about how human beings experience themselves as persons. Rather, he was arguing that Hindu ideology was holistic, and that it was based on the notion of hierarchy, defined as "the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole, it being understood that in the majority of societies it is religion which provides the view of the whole, and that the ranking will thus be religious in nature" (1966). And when he argued further that "individualism" and "the individual" are dominant, even sacred, values in the regnant ideology of the West (that is, Europe and North America), he was following a long line of sociological thinking, associated especially with Durkheim and Mauss. In short, Dumont's approach is concerned with values and ideology, but is agnostic with respect to the question of personal experience.

Marriott and his followers, on the other hand, do not frame their questions in terms of ideologies and structures. Rather, they seek to identify and analyze fundamental "cultural assumptions" that inform different areas of Hindu life,

from traditional sciences like astrology and Ayurveda to contemporary social practice, and they very deliberately seek to ensure that their theoretical terms are consistent with these indigenous assumptions. Despite the critiques of Mines and others, several of the pervasive assumptions identified by Marriott and his circle have been confirmed by scholars from a variety of disciplines working on South Asia, because they do indeed seem to accurately describe some of the basic parameters of Hindu life.

For example, the idea that people's natures are continually altered through transactions of substance broadly accepted. One of the main types of such transformative transactions is that between persons and their environments, as we saw earlier. And there are kinds of transaction as well: Words of praise can be transacted, and so can words of insult. One can transact with a landowner, exchanging labor for food, or with a god, exchanging worship for blessings and protection. All such transactions have both moral and physical effects. One's body, and hence one's morality or dharma, is altered by eating certain kinds of foods, by engaging in certain kinds of sexual intercourse, by taking part in certain rituals, and by falling under certain kinds of (astrological) influence. Bodily substance and morality change throughout life, and they can be improved or made worse by proper eating, proper marriage, proper worship, and so forth. Morality is therefore not simply a matter of psychology, or intention, or mental state. It is substantial, it is immanent in the body. This is why caste has so fundamentally to do with intimate physical contact, especially food and sex. When you have sexual contact with someone else, or when you eat food that they have prepared, something of their moral and physical nature is transferred to you. It is therefore acceptable to have intimate relations with someone of higher rank, because if their substance "rubs off" on you, your own rank will be elevated. But you must be very careful not to have intimate relations with someone of lower rank, because your own rank might thereby be lowered. Ultimately, Marriott and his students argue that it is better to think of Hindu persons as "dividuals" who are constantly being transformed by the multiple exchanges of daily life, rather than as "individuals" with some enduring and changeless essence. In a peasant society like that of Garhwal, most transactions and exchanges take place within the intimate confines of the family. Continuous transactions of food, words, bodily contact, and the like mean that the person is thought to be subsumed in, or subordinated to, the family, to a much greater degree than in the cultures of Western Europe and North America.

With respect to the existence or nonexistence of "individuals" in South Asian (especially Hindu) culture, I would agree with Dumont that individualism as a value is strongly subordinated to the whole, with the proviso that for the material discussed here, the relevant whole is the family and not the caste. The subor-

dination of the individual to the family is illustrated over and over again in the pages of this book, especially in this chapter. But I also agree with Marriott, that the fundamental assumptions and practices of Hindus are more consistent with "dividualism" than with "individualism." My agreement must be qualified in two ways, however. First of all, times are changing, and the values and cultural styles of Western individualism are being introduced at many levels, from the institutions of participatory democracy, which grow stronger with every new election, to public education, television, movies and the Internet. Polit (2006) has shown, for example, how the growth of the nuclear family in Garhwal is related to public education as well as to economic factors. My second qualification to Marriott's notion of dividualism has to do with the comparative nature of ethnology. When we make assertions at such a high level of generality, they are always comparative, and usually relative. The implicit term of comparison here is "us"—that is, the culture of the dominant classes in Europe and North America, and the discussion regarding individualism and dividualism is not one of absolutes, but of relative degrees. Of course there are individuals in India, people who pursue a lifestyle and fashion a self that is similar to that of Western individuals—but they are comparatively rare there, while in "the West" they constitute the norm. However, as Geertz put it, the idea of the individual is a "rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures" (1983: 126), and that is why, as I asserted at the beginning of this chapter, the typical object of ritual healing in most cultures is a group and not an individual. In Garhwal, the relevant group is the family, and family unity is a ritual as well as a therapeutic and a moral principle.

This family unity is not simply a result of the exigencies of daily life, however. It is also a moral value, and certain rituals—especially those discussed in this book—are used to create and strengthen it. By empowering particular substances and then consuming them, bathing in them, or offering them to a god or some other higher being; by subjecting persons to the transformative power of Vedic mantras or Ganges water; or by performing rituals that transform troublesome ghosts into divine ancestors—by means of such ritual transactions persons are transformed, along with their relationships to their environment, their neighbors, and their families. Let us have a closer look, then, at some healing rituals, and see what they tell us about the relationship between persons their families.

A Pension for the God

When someone in Garhwal is afflicted with disease or misfortune, he or she often begins the search for solutions with an oracular consultation (see

chapter 3), and I will also begin this chapter with one. The following transcript is from a consultation with Gaurja Mai, the lively high-caste oracle described in chapter 4. The first time I visited her, she began the oracular session with a brief ritual and a very lengthy mantra summoning the goddess to appear. Once she was in trance, she turned to the first client, a dignified, well-dressed Rajput about sixty years old. She asked him a series of typical, rather formal questions about the object of inquiry, and quickly established that the afflicted person was a woman. The client interrupted her almost immediately, however, and came directly to the point: Why, he asked, was his family quarrelling, even though the "distribution" (presumably of land) was complete? Gaurja Mai told him that he had already performed many rituals, but they had not removed the affliction. He had "fed the god," she said, but the god's "stomach wasn't filled." She encouraged her client to worship the afflicting god together with his family, but he replied that he had tried to do so and it simply hadn't worked, because the family refused to unite. He therefore asked her to tell him a way for himself. She warned him that if the quarrelling family members went on like this, the afflicting *devta* would get a pension (she used the English word). In other words, if there were no resolution to the quarrel, both sides to the dispute would continue offering sacrifices to the god, each sending him to attack the other. He would keep eating his "pension" of goat curry, and they would continue to suffer, but their problem would not be resolved until they managed to worship him collectively. The client passed over her warnings, however, and persisted in asking for ritual instructions, and so finally she asked if he wanted to "send the god back"—that is, if he wanted to send a counter-curse (see chapter 7, "Sending the God Back"). Such a ritual is thought to be terribly sinful, because it involves cursing within the family, and the client was clearly uncomfortable at the very thought of it. He tried to avoid answering directly, and so she repeated her question: Did he want to send the god back? Very reluctantly he said that he did, and she told him the method. She told him to perform the *kas puja* (see chapter 3, "Kas Puja"), and gave further instructions about the rituals he should perform in order to "send the god back."

After a break in the audio recording she resumed, giving him instructions for another, related ritual, the *chhal puja* (see chapter 3, "Exorcizing the Crafty Demons"). Most probably, this had to do with the woman identified as the main victim at the beginning of the consultation. Gaurja Mai advised him to perform this ritual for the afflicted woman, and then the client returned to the problem of disunity within the family. The oracle urged him over and over to unite the family so that they would worship together, and finally, at the end of his session, he agreed to do so. She advised him to perform one ritual along with his immediate family in order to counteract the curse, and a second ritual with the

extended family to foster unity and to remove the cause of the affliction. Here is my translation of the session:[2]

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer: I speak the truth to whoever comes to my *thali*. I don't lie. I will say whatever my mother tells me to say. I don't speak without her permission. I recite her praises before playing the *thali*. You have borne the cost of these grains, wayfarer; they are from your own home; you've taken the trouble to bring them here. You've prepared them in your own home. For which plant are you doing this inquiry [*janch*]?

Is [your problem] due to the eight metals [e.g., a household idol?]
Is it due to iron?
Is it due to money?
Is it due to shiny things [e.g., jewellery, gold, silver]?
Is it due to shiny clothes?
Has it to do with land?
Has it to do with household things?
Has it to do with four-legged cows or buffaloes?[3]
Is it because of any kind of animal?
Well, wayfarer, it's going toward a person.
The inquiry is in relation to a person.
Look, wayfarer, it's even a person.
Look, I'm saying it's due to a woman.
You have to answer "yes" or "no."
This is an inquiry concerning the family:
Women, men, children,
People and livestock, farm and field.
An inquiry regarding the whole family has begun.
Wayfarer, no one is on his sickbed.
No one is dying.
It's not an eighty-year-old elder.
It's not a nursing babe.[4]
They are in their prime.
They have become restless.
The family has a senior and a junior brother.
It's an ancient lineage.
There's a quarrel in the family.
It takes two hands to clap [i.e., both are at fault].
But no one even says good or ill.
You're making an inquiry.
You've even bound your bundle.[5]

You're not speaking:
Say "yes" or "no"!

CLIENT: OK, Parameshvari,[6] but when the distribution is finished, why is there a quarrel?

ORACLE: I don't know; I just follow the path that the goddess shows me. Your whole family is afflicted [*kaleshkari*], and you've already done one puja, but you've gotten no peace [*chain*]. This is a matter of human desires [*nar ichchha bat*], but the goddess will say whatever she says, and men will do whatever they do. Speak quickly! [*bolo phataphat*, i.e., "Interrupt me if I'm wrong!"] It's a family matter, in the elder line. Am I right? Someone has been caught by a curse [*pukar-bandhi*]. You've already done a puja to get rid of this curse [*hamkar*; see below, "The Man Whose Land Was 'Eaten'"], am I right? You've done a puja, but it didn't work. You fed [the god], but his stomach wasn't filled.

CLIENT: Yes, Parameshvari, we've worshiped, but it didn't work. So tell me, how should we worship?

ORACLE: [Here Gaurja Mai begins to describe the *kas puja*] Listen to me: you need to take grass between your teeth, and bind your necks like cows. Five men will be there as witnesses, the five deities [*panch parameshvar*]. The guru will tear leaves of mango and *pipal* trees, and place them on your heads. Look, unless and until you are all of one mind, then it will be difficult to have peace in the family.

CLIENT: The family won't come together. You tell me a way for myself, personally.

ORACLE: What way can I tell you? If you do so, he'll get a pension. He'll get a pension!

CLIENT: But if my family won't go along, then what can I do? Tell me the way. If we go on like this, then it's bad for the god, too.

ORACLE: *They* summoned him didn't they? It's Kachiya Bhairav. You have to worship him, understand? So what's the path? You tell me and I'll show you the way. You're not united in this, are you? Do you want to send the god back [*vapas karna*]?

CLIENT: We can't unite.

ORACLE: I asked you, "Do you want to send the god back?"

CLIENT (very reluctantly): Yes—how can we do it?

ORACLE: Why are you cursing each other, when you're one family?

CLIENT: I want to send him back.

ORACLE: Can't you simply join hands and worship?

CLIENT: No one is prepared to humble himself.

ORACLE: Then listen, wayfarer, listen: take cow dung in your hands and grass between your teeth, and bind yourselves with rope—your own family, your intimate relations [*bhitar ka parivar*]. [Bring] driftwood, and sand from a ravine. Bring eighty-four thorny plants, and water from seven sources. Bring a piece of the funnel where the water enters the mill, and some cambium layer from a pine tree, just beneath the bark. Sacrifice a *ginjar*-root, sacrifice a pumpkin. [Bring] a half-cooked bread, an effigy of barley flour, a red hen, red cloth and black cloth, incense, five sweets [*panchameva*], four pieces of betel nut, a reel of thread, and two roosters—one for the ritual to counteract their curse [*hamkar puja*] and another to send the god back—along with bread made from the seven-grain mixture.

Send the god back to them with instructions [*bak*] that he should bring them to your shelter [i.e., they should beg for mercy] after six months, or a year. If you don't do this, you will certainly have more trouble: from animals to people, from infants to children! There's no milk in the cows, no intelligence in the people, the men and the women are troubled! He is troubling you slowly. Partly in your land, partly in your house, partly in your wealth [*dhatu*]. You won't get relief until you worship properly! [The client asks for further clarification, but Gaurja Mai says she's already told him what he needs to know. He implores her and she answers, speaking extremely rapidly:] a piece of the spout that drops grain on to the millstone wooden nail fashioned from a tree stuck by lightning blade of *babula* grass iron sifter black and white mustard seeds eighty-four thorny plants water from seven sources piece of the funnel where the water enters the mill cambium layer from a pine tree just beneath the bark a gourd a pumpkin half-cooked bread effigy of barley flour red hen red cloth black cloth incense five sweets four pieces of betel nut reel of thread two roosters bread made from seven grains!

She assures him that the ritual will be effective, saying, "If it's not successful, you needn't take the name of Gaurja Mai of Chandpur Fort." But the client is still unsure: should he do the curse-removing ritual inside or outside? She tells him to do it outside, in a swampy place.

After a short break, my audio recording of the session resumes with the oracle listing the items that will be necessary for the client's daughter's *chhal puja*: a black male goat, colored powder, a comb, a mirror, bangles, the hair-like

extension that women wear in their ponytails, collyrium (*kajal*), rice pudding, puffed sugar candy, dry-roasted grains, puffed rice, and a tiny ritual palanquin made from the *karonji* plant. The oracle instructs him to release the chick and the palanquin in the eastern direction. She tells him that there is a burning ground to the northeast of his house, and a road above it that divides in two: one goes uphill and one goes straight. He should follow the straight path, she says, and worship below it. He will have to "sweep" his daughter (*jhar phuk*; see chapter 3, "Exorcizing the Crafty Demons") three times: once in the morning, once in the evening, and once at the cremation ground. The oracle seems tired, and ready to move on to the next consultation, but the client says "Wait, Parameshvari, there's more!" She says,

> ORACLE: It's telling me that there is an affliction from the god of your place [*sthanbasi devata*]. The family appears to be all right, but actually someone is afflicted. "God's name on their lips, but a dagger at their hips [*muh pe ram-ram, bagal pe chhurri*]." There are some noises at night in the house, there is trouble between elder and younger lines, it is difficult to unite them. You worshiped, but got no relief—say "yes" or "no"! Why aren't you worshiping the god together? It's a heavy affliction, and you are all separate: younger, elder, and mother. How can you satisfy the god unless you all unite? There are fifty-two of you, but you still make nine bundles of grass [*bavan mutti nau puli*].
>
> CLIENT: I'm satisfied but the others aren't. Must I worship over and over?
>
> ORACLE: So what will you do?
>
> CLIENT: I'm prepared to worship over and over, but what's the use? I've already done it once.
>
> ORACLE: But it didn't work—you must do it again. After all, you're doing the *chhal puja* as well. Are you ready to do it in the month of Paush?
>
> CLIENT: Yes.
>
> ORACLE: Then summon the god jointly! If the seat is pure then the self is pure; if the self is pure then the mantra is pure! So tell me, will you unite your family? Speak!
>
> CLIENT: I'll unite them!
>
> ORACLE: First you do the anti-curse ritual secretly, for your own family [she points to the rice in her hand]. And after that, you worship the god collectively.

CLIENT: They are three families and I am the fourth. They are fighting among themselves, but I will unify them. I'm doing these rituals time and again; if they agree but keep something [i.e., their true feelings] in their bellies, then what can I do?

ORACLE: Listen, the god who eats the puja is the one who gives relief. I am only the path-finding hero—I don't eat the puja, so how can I give the relief? There are two parties here: man and god [*nar/narayan*]. First you bring the men together; only then will god be satisfied with your puja. So do the *hamkar puja* secretly. Do the summoning of the *chhal*, in the month of Paush. If it doesn't work, then don't take the name of Chandpur Fort. Adesh! My mother Gaura, the Emperor Kala Pir, the goddess of the King of Kings! Adesh, oh my nephew Kashi Lal![7]

This man's uncomfortable moral deliberations, along with his anxieties and concerns, were all centered on the family. Whatever the affliction was (and I heard nothing about the symptoms), he had already visited several oracles and determined that it was caused by strife and cursing within the family—a diagnosis that was confirmed by the oracle. The client had attempted to resolve this on many occasions—not only by performing rituals himself, but also by attempting to persuade the extended family to unite and perform them together. But he felt frustrated and powerless, and at the time of this consultation, he was nearly ready to give up, to "retreat" as it were into his own joint family, to protect them (again by means of ritual) by "sending the god back"—that is, by engaging in counter-magic against whoever had cursed him, in effect cursing within the family. But to do so is to cross a fundamental moral boundary, and so the final result of the consultation was rather mixed: on the one hand, the client said he would perform the necessary rituals to protect his immediate (nuclear) family, but on the other hand he said that he would attempt once more to unify the extended family, so that they would perform a collective ritual and thereby eliminate the ultimate cause of the problem. An important part of this collective ritual was the *kas puja*, which Gaurja Mai explicitly mentioned to the client: "Listen to me: you need to take grass between your teeth, and bind your necks like cows. Five men will be there as witnesses, the 'five deities' [*panch parameshvar*]. The guru will tear leaves of mango and *pipal*, and place them on your heads. Look, unless and until you are all of one mind, it will be difficult to have peace in the family." I have already described the *kas puja* in detail and will not do so again here. But it is important to emphasize how graphically this ritual serves to unite the family, by binding them together with a rope before they take a collective vow to complete the puja. The presence of the "five witnesses" is crucial, and what they witness is, among other things, the fact that the family is unified and that no one is

initiating magical aggression against the other. The second phase of the *kas puja*, the animal sacrifice, is done at the border of the family's property, and I have already suggested that this defines the family and its land as a single unit.

A Family Quarrel

A second excerpt comes from an oracular consultation with Jamnu Baba, a low-caste oracle living in a rather isolated location not far from Nauti. The client was a young Rajput man about thirty years old. He came to Jamnu's house with a friend one Saturday morning after Dabar Singh and I had already arrived. Jamnu Baba's father was also present, and he helped to perform the initial rituals invoking the *devta*. Jamnu's possession was, as always, rather dramatic. He went into trance quickly, and then moved suddenly and violently, and shouted very loudly. His language was quite difficult to understand. During this consultation, Jamnu Baba established immediately that the problem had to do with the family and not with a single individual. The client's family was not prospering, and everyone in it was "restless" and "uncertain." This was because they were afflicted by the family goddess, Kalinka. She, in turn, was upset because, immediately after a collective ritual by the family, someone had worshiped her separately. At the end of the session, Jamnu Baba urged the client to unite the family and worship the family goddess again, and also to complete the "big puja" he had promised her.

The session began when Jamnu Baba lit incense, offered it to the four directions, went outside and offered it outside at the god's *than*, then came back in and offered it to the internal *than*. He sat down and began to "play" the rice in his *thali*, uttering a mantra that was quite long, but inaudible. He then went into trance and shouted out,

> Oracle: Adesh! Adesh! Be victorious! Be victorious! Be victorious! Be victorious! [*raji ro, raji ro, raji ro, raji ro*!] Oho, look at these rice grains, you've brought them from your own place. But these grains haven't to do with theft; they haven't to do with valuables; they haven't to do with land. If what I say is true, fine—if not, then stop my *thali*!
>
> Client: It's fine! As long as you speak the truth, I will not stop your *thali*, but when you don't tell the facts, then I will.
>
> Father: He doesn't lie! He doesn't lie at all!
>
> Oracle: Look, these grains haven't to do with valuables, they haven't to do with land. I'm telling you the truth: they are from a particular place!

They have to do with a family relative! Here I can see it's about a person: if this is not true, then tell me! You are worried about a person: it has to do with a person.

FATHER: You're worried about someone.

CLIENT: Yes, I am!

ORACLE: Look, it's about a family, about the whole family, but no one is lying on his cot [i.e., no one is terribly ill]. It concerns your family, and that's why you've come to my shrine.

FATHER: Yes! That's why you've come to this shrine!

ORACLE: You work hard but you do not prosper [*harkat hai lekin barkat nahim hai*]. And you are disturbed [*chal-bichal*]—if this isn't true, then stop my *thali*! I can see here that they are the grains of a family. I don't lie! You are disturbed, it's a woman's matter. You're disturbed about a woman! You've brought these rice grains because you're disturbed about the whole family! Understand? Look, you're the eldest in the family, and you're wondering why your whole family is disturbed. Understand? Ask properly, don't just say "Yes."

CLIENT: You're absolutely correct—why should I stop your *thali*?

ORACLE: You have a doubt, that's why you've come to my shrine. Understand? But it's not a serious affliction. No one is lying on his cot, no one is suffering from illness [*dukh-bimari*]. But everyone's mind is restless [*tittra-bittra*]. And you wonder why. Mother and father are separate, and the whole family is restless. That's why you've brought these grains to my shrine, to do this inquiry [*janch*]. But I'm telling you that it's no one's envious curse [*hamkar*], and it's no one's dying curse [*jaikar*]. Have no doubts! Look, here is a shrine! The shrine of your chosen deity, your ancestral chosen deity [*pitrakari ishth*]. She is the one who leads the way! The goddess Kalinka lives at your shrine [*madhi*]!

FATHER: *You* are the one who shows the path!

ORACLE: And she has not just afflicted you, she's afflicted the whole family! She's there, and you are striving, but you do not prosper. Everyone is suffering, no one is happy. Ask properly: don't just say "Yes!" Sometimes she seizes the men, sometimes the women. She's giving problems to someone's animals. The real troublemaker [*tagata*] here is Kalinka. She's giving you one affliction after another [*silsila rag*]. Look! Sometimes she manifests in dreams. Look! She's in different families. Didn't you

make the eight-animal sacrifice [*ashthabali*] to her? Everyone had a different attitude [*man*] during that sacrifice. Ask properly: don't just say "Yes"!

CLIENT: Everything is correct. I'll keep quiet unless you say something wrong.

FATHER: God is speaking the truth; why should you interrupt?

ORACLE: These rice grains show Kalinka's affliction. If it's someone else's affliction, then you needn't take my name. Ask properly: don't just say "Yes"! It's Kalinka's affliction, but you suspect it's someone else's. If I'm wrong, then stop me.

CLIENT: No, no, it's absolutely true.

ORACLE: Oho, look! You have another doubt! You suspect someone else. If it's not so, then stop me! And look! Kalinka dances first: no one can dance before she does! Understand? "She is the protector whose land it is [*tai gi bhumi vai gi raksha*]." No one else has the power of Kalinka. You don't understand: those from outside cannot enter this shrine [*madhi*]. But your whole family is disturbed! And it's Kalinka's affliction, not just on you, but on everyone! They all have different opinions, but everyone is afflicted! Sometimes the people, sometimes the animals. But the people have suffered no loss [*hani*].

CLIENT: That's right. The people have suffered no loss.

ORACLE: If I'm wrong then stop me. Don't just say "Yes!" She hasn't really harmed the people. Look, you're worshiping separately at this Kalinka's shrine. And you're all upset. But I can do better than this, by telling you the correct path. Make the family be of one mind! Make them be like one fist! Make them one, unify them, and then do Kalinka's ritual!

FATHER: You do it, yourself!

CLIENT: What?

FATHER: You worship this Kalinka, separately!

CLIENT: Yes, I promised to do puja. That's why I came.

JAMNU: Yes, the goddess was happy because you were going to worship. But in the meanwhile, in the meanwhile there was some trouble [*belam*].

CLIENT: Why was there trouble?

ORACLE: Kalinka did it, don't you understand? Because of your family disagreements [*man-mithav*], someone in the family did a separate puja there [secretly]. Don't you understand?

CLIENT: Yes, that's right!

FATHER: Oho, when someone has given puja there, then you should say so!

CLIENT: Someone offered the eight sacrifices separately.

FATHER: That's what the *devta* is saying!

ORACLE: You were absent at that sacrifice! Don't you understand? Were you present? If so, then stop my *thali*!

FATHER: Speak! What were you saying? Is the *devta* telling the truth, or isn't he? If you don't understand, then what can we do?

ORACLE: You were not present at that sacrifice. There's a woman and a man, and the goddess afflicted the man. She gave him some trouble [*arishth*] in the middle of the night! Did she throw him down from the second floor,[8] or not? The man was there at the sacrifice, but his wife was not.

FATHER (chuckling): Well done [*dhanya ho*]!

CLIENT: I'm an ignorant man: tell me the true path!

ORACLE: The trouble that came in the middle is from Kalinka! Kalinka! Kalinka! Worship her together, with clear minds, and your problems will be solved! Now go! What do you understand?

CLIENT: I'll worship Kalinka, but how should I worship her?

FATHER (chuckling): Right!

ORACLE: You have already summoned Kalinka in your mind.

CLIENT: What kind of ritual?

ORACLE: Not just a small ritual: you have to do a really big one!

FATHER: Yesss!

ORACLE: Did you promise to do a puja?

CLIENT: Yes. I had no afflictions, no problems, but I offered her a buffalo out of sheer happiness. What happened to this sacrifice?

ORACLE: You were single-minded, but your family was not! You are the one who worships her and sings her hymns, and your family supports you. She has given you everything, but the others are doing something or other behind your back; they are not obeying you! If that's not true, then say so! You didn't have any troubles, no difficulties, no dying curse, no missing valuables—you only wanted to worship her in the correct way. You shouldn't have done such a small puja, you should do a complete eight-animal sacrifice [*ashthabali*]!

CLIENT: I promised to do puja within five years. Next year, the five years will be complete, and then I will do her puja. But if my family comes together immediately, I'll do it right away.

ORACLE: Kalinka has put some troubles in your path. But don't worry! If she doesn't accomplish your heart's desire [*man ke murad*], if she doesn't turn your fifteen into twenty-five, then don't take my name! Ask properly: don't just say "Yes"! What do you understand? I'm giving you the map! You should only worship her after your heart's desire is accomplished. Then you should give the eight-animal sacrifice! I'm telling you the path: do you understand? I don't lie—understand? But the others are not of the same mind as you: do you understand?

CLIENT: Should the whole family summon the god, or just me?

ORACLE: Just you.

FATHER: Just you.

ORACLE: You should do it yourself, in exactly the way that the others already did it.

CLIENT'S COMPANION: This man is doing it from his own happiness; no one forced him.

ORACLE: Yes, he's doing it from his own happiness. And he's not trying to give anyone else trouble thereby.

FATHER: And nor should he, nor should he!

ORACLE: He's doing it from his own happiness, his own happiness, *his own happiness*! But in the meantime somebody caused some trouble. What do you understand? The trouble is not from someone outside; it's from your own family! What do you understand? I won't tell you false words. I'm a fakir. The guardian of the family said, "This is happening" and "That is happening," and the family was disturbed. Look, *botiya*,[9] I'll grant your wish, and after that you can worship me. Take these rice grains! Take them!

> Adesh, oh my Kaldu Bagad!
> Adesh, oh my Dobari Bar!
> Adesh, oh my mother Chandi!
> Victory! Victory! Victory! Victory![10]

After this consultation, the client told us that the oracle had been a hundred percent accurate. "Seven years ago," he said, "my buffalo was bred, and bore a calf. And I offered it to my family goddess. The calf wandered all over the

place, but wherever he roamed, he always came back in the middle of the night. Just now, I returned home on the evening of the 12th, but on the 13th morning he was missing. I was thinking how bad this was, since I had raised him to sacrifice to the goddess. I was the guardian of the family, and it happened the very day I came home."

A closer look at the transcript shows that what the oracle actually said only partly corresponds to the missing calf that was on the client's mind. In the first part of the consultation, the oracle insisted that family harmony had been disturbed by someone doing a private puja, perhaps one involving magical aggression. There was also a hint here of punishment for this act: the one who performed this puja was "thrown from the roof" because he had worshipped the goddess separately from his extended family.

A Happy Ending

The following case study was related to me by Surendra from Gair Sain, who (rather unusually) functions as both guru and oracle. It represents something of a paradigm case of how disturbed family relations can lead to cursing and affliction, which continue to reverberate down through the generations.

> This is a story about Village X, which is part of our own sub-district. There was an old widow there named Bina Devi. She and her husband had one son whose marriage they arranged with great pomp, and he in turn had a son named Shyam Singh [see figure 5.1]. Bina Devi's husband quarrelled with his two brothers over jewellery and land, and the brothers moved out, leaving him with the ancestral land. The old lady had an evil tongue. She didn't get along with

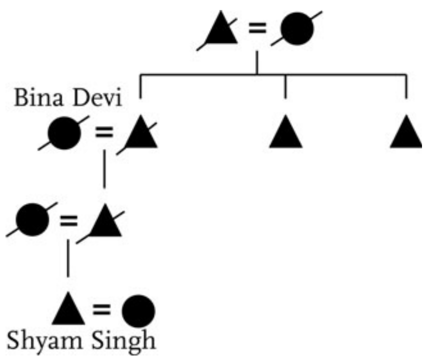


FIGURE 5.1. Shyam Singh's family.

the rest of the family, and that is also part of the reason why they moved out.

As soon as the two brothers moved out and set up their new home, the old woman's husband died. And because of the earlier dispute, the two brothers went to Bhairav's *than* at Kothyar and laid a curse: "If we have a right to this land, then make him [Shyam Singh] an orphan, just like us!" They uttered this curse at Kothiyar Bar, and within a year the old woman's son and his wife also died, so that Shyam Singh was indeed left an orphan, and she had to care for him alone. The old woman had a bit of jewellery: a nose ring, a nose stud, a silver necklace weighing nearly 800 grams, silver bangles, and so forth. All of these were actually the collective property of the brothers.

Shyam Singh grew up, and the old woman started thinking about making arrangements for his wedding. She wanted to get him married before she died. She managed to do so, and the little family of three was functioning well, but six months later, the old woman died. On the day she died the whole village came, except for her husband's brothers. During the funeral rituals, someone went inside and stole all of her jewellery. A week after she had been burned at the cremation ground, the brothers went to her house and searched for the jewellery, but they couldn't find it. She had moved it a month before and put it in a box for safekeeping. They searched everywhere because everyone had an equal claim to it, but they couldn't find it.

Meanwhile two years had gone by since Shyam Singh had married, but he lived his life like an orphan. The extended family was split up, and his uncles didn't help him at all. He was in trouble, and he and his wife didn't have any children, either. People told him he should take his wife to the doctor and he did so, but the doctor said there was no female disease there. It looked as though his line might be finished, and he went to an oracle, who told him about the quarrel and the curse that had destroyed his family. At the same time the matter of the jewellery emerged, and the oracle said that this was in fact the reason why the brothers had gone to Kashi Lal Bhairav's *than* in the first place, and laid a curse that had lasted for three generations. They had said, "This matter will not rest until they have been destroyed down to the last grain!"

Shyam Singh visited several oracles, and the same diagnosis always emerged. He thought, "I'm happy to return their share of the land, but what can I do about the jewellery? It's been stolen!" But the *devta* told them that they would suffer until the three brothers

or their descendants had gone to the temple and distributed the property fairly. "Go!" he said. "Take my rice, and you will receive relief within three months! If you do not get relief, then my name isn't Kashi Lal Bhairav!" So Shyam Singh went home and called his uncles, and together they summoned the *devta* and took a vow, and by god's mercy, his wife became pregnant. Then Shyam Singh called the elders of the village, the ones who knew the whole story, and he pledged his own part of the land in security to purchase jewellery for the others, because the god had said, "You will have to give your jewellery, otherwise how can you satisfy the curse that was laid at my *than*?"

So they decided to do puja together. I was the guru, and there was a big crowd of villagers. First of all we went to their boundary stone and worshiped the curse. They took handfuls of earth to represent the jewellery and land that was kept from the brothers who left home. They pacified Bhairav by joining their hands and paying a fine. Then they went home and arranged for the *devta* to dance, and both sides worshiped him with happy hearts, and he said, "Now I am peaceful! All of these matters are from three generations ago, and if you had understood on that day, then you wouldn't have suffered so much. Now you will have no more affliction from me!" He gave them rice grains, and he drank water from both sides, and now, by the grace of god, everything is all right.

The Forgotten Shrine

The following oracular consultation took place at the home of Surendra, who was again possessed by the god Samin. The client was about thirty years old, and from the relatively low Ironsmith caste. The case was rather complex. Three brothers lived together with their respective families, but two of the brothers drove out the third. This third brother then ordered his own family to stop sharing food and water with his brothers' families. He cursed those who had driven him out, asking the god to punish the others, and then he died. His survivors built a new house, along with a new *than* for the *devta*. The two families cursed by the dead man were afflicted, and in the end they had to ask his survivors to conduct a joint ritual with them. But this ritual was performed *at the new shrine* rather than the old one. As the oracle put it, the families were united, but the god was forgotten—meaning that, in effect, the dead man's curse was forgotten, but continued to be effective. The dead man had made

this curse at the old *than*, and therefore the ritual to remove it should have been performed there. I was present and recorded the session.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, the rice grains that have fallen on the *than* have to do with your family. You haven't come bringing someone else's question.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan. They have to do with my own family.

ORACLE: This affliction has become evident in your whole family, from the people to the animals.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Women, men, children—they are all afflicted.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, you've taken some rice grains to the house of an oracle and inquired, but it wasn't done properly.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer: confusion has arisen in the people's hearts, oh wayfarer!

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: You have made a vow at my *than*.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer: the first affliction is on the side of the women. After that the men and animals are afflicted.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, there is *ghat* and *jaikar* here;[11] and look, wayfarer, there are three parties [*paksh*] here [i.e., there are three families involved]. Look, wayfarer, whoever you did the collective vow with . . .

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan; but look, there are not three families, oh God of the wayfarer! Hey Bhagwan!

ORACLE: Hey wayfarer, the vow was not made with one mind. You were not sharing food, wayfarer, you were not sharing food.[12]

CLIENT: Oh Bhagwan, we were not sharing food, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Why did you not complete the vow of the senior male [*kuram babu*] first of all, wayfarer? This is why the god is not speaking[13] in this *than*.[14] And wayfarer, there are two Bhairav *than*s, two *chauki*s,[15] in this place.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: One Bhairav and two *chauki*s at the same place, wayfarer. One Bhairav but two *chauki*s.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan, it's true.

ORACLE: This has to do with the old *than*; you should have done the vow at the old *than*.

CLIENT: Bhagwan, we had abandoned that old place.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, these three families must summon Bhairav together, and after that they should do the vow of my senior male, oh wayfarer, my dear [*yar*].

CLIENT: When we were kicked out of that place, we abandoned it. Why should we go back there to worship?

ORACLE: Look wayfarer, it was at that place where my senior male, the guardian of the family, died.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan, he did.

ORACLE: Hey wayfarer, Bhairav appeared there as an afflicting god [*doshi rup*]. They did the vow and did not observe the ban on sharing food. They began to share food and drink, but this was only for show [*lok liyaz*, i.e., it was superficial]. Why did you share food with them?

CLIENT: We were not sharing, Bhagwan, but when other family members start eating and drinking with them, what can I do?

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, the senior male laid a curse at my *than*. Until there is a decision at my *than* about this issue, then you should not share food and water with them. You must live separately!

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: You have been suffering ever since you did the vow at my *than*.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan, that's exactly what happened.

ORACLE: First of all, wayfarer, you have to do the vow for the senior male. Do it in the name of Bhairav, and make someone a witness. The minds of everyone in your family are very unsettled.

At first glance, this case study seems to abrogate or to reverse the principle of family unity. After all, the god himself is advising the client to stop sharing food with his relatives. But this follows the logic of the situation. The client's father was kicked out of his family home, after which he ordered his children not to share food with his brothers any more. He cursed them by appealing to

Bhairav, and then he died. Later the family conducted a joint ritual, but this did not remove the curse. Why not? Primarily because he had uttered the curse at the original family shrine, and so the ritual of reconciliation should have been performed there; instead it was performed at the new shrine that the man's sons had built after they moved out. As a result, this ritual was unauthorized and ineffective, and the dead man's family should therefore not have resumed sharing food with the families of his brothers. The *devta* tells the client that in order to get rid of the curse, he must (1) make a vow to the dead man that he will make amends with his brothers at the correct ritual location, (2) perform the ritual, and (3) only then resume commensal relations.

The Man Whose Land Was Eaten

Another case study comes from the winter of 2002, when I accompanied the guru Jagdish to the Nagpur-Pokhari region of Chamoli to perform a *hamkar puja*. It was a long, cold bus ride down the Alakananda valley to Rudraprayag, where the Mandakini River flowing from Kedarnath joins the Alakananda River originating at Badrinath. We crossed the river and then turned back upstream briefly, before climbing steeply to the ridge separating the catchment areas of the two rivers. We drove along this ridge for over an hour, finally getting down from the bus at sunset, after which we walked through the cold winter night for several hours before finally arriving at the clients' home. They were quite well off by local standards, and soon after arriving they offered us a peg of whiskey. While we relaxed, Jagdish told me their problem in brief:

> Three brothers lived together, and one of them had no children [meaning that he had no sons]. When he died, one of his brothers took over his land and gave it to his own son, who began to farm it. The deceased brother's ghost was already unhappy because he had no children, and when his nephew began "eating his land," he became jealous and angry. He afflicted the wife of the man who was farming the land. She had to have an operation, she broke her hand, and now she is afflicted with eye problems. They went to see many doctors, but no illness could be diagnosed, despite her suffering. They consulted an oracle and discovered the cause, after which they summoned me.

At the beginning of the ritual, Jagdish applied *pithaim* to all the participants (figure 5.2). The purpose, he told me later in Heidelberg, as we watched a digital recording of the ritual, was "to purify everyone, to help them focus

their minds on this work, to keep them calm." Next he made a three-cornered *yantra* (figure 5.3), which was symbolic (a *nishan*, or sign, as Jagdish put it) of all the anger and negative energies associated with the dead man. The circle around the six-pointed star is called the *samudra* or "ocean" (figure 5.4). The square ensures that the *jogini*s (dangerous, generally malevolent female spirits) stay within the *yantra*. The three-pointed *trishul*s (tridents) belong to Kali, and are meant to prevent evil beings from interrupting the ritual and ruining it. They point in the four primary directions. The color red stands for Kali, while yellow stands for peacefulness (*shanti*), so that here the yellow color is keeping Kali peaceful. A half-cooked sweet bread is made from 1.25 *ser* of wheat flour, and placed on top of the yantra (figure 5.5), and on top of that is put 1.25 *ser* of *khichadi* (mixed rice and black gram), the seven-grain mixture, a pumpkin, and other things—this is all food for the *hamkar*. On top of it all, Jagdish places a gruesome image made of barley flour, with a large, protruding red tongue—this is the form of the *hamkar* (*hamkar rup*), and is indistinguishable from the Masan image that is made in the *kas* and *chhal pujas* (see figure 3.3). A tiny silver image, the form of the ancestor (*pitra rup*), is also lying there. The barley-flour image of the *hamkar* is dressed in red cloth, and Jagdish says it is now the form of Kali (*kali rup*). Now Kali is worshiped, and the torn workbasket fragments are covered with *yantra*s and various foods, which are offered to the *hamkar*. Lying among the other ritual items is a handful of *kusha* grass wrapped in black cloth. This represents the "corpse" of the dead man. To begin with, all of these things are worshiped along with the *hamkar*. Later, the silver *murti* will be separated from them, and its puja will be done separately.

Everyone present is a member of the family; they are all descendents of the three brothers. After some time, the main client says aloud that he is worshiping

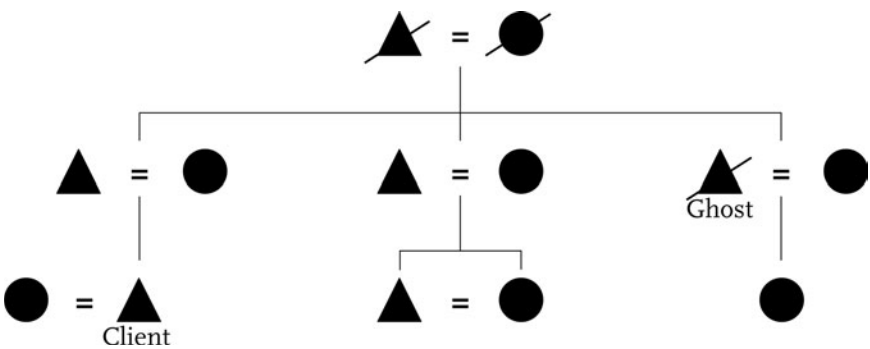


FIGURE 5.2. The family of "the man whose land was eaten."



FIGURE 5.3. *Hamkar puja yantra:* a *yantra* of negative energies (photo by William S. Sax).

the *hamkar* in order to dispel his suffering. He is the one who was given the land of his childless uncle, and he is the one who farmed it. "I've eaten what I've eaten," he says, "but I do not want anyone else to eat this suffering! It was in my stars [*graha*], but no one else should suffer this way."

Jagdish recites a mantra meant to protect the family now and in the future. In this mantra, various ritual objects and substances are named: black mustard seeds, yellow mustard seeds, cow-dung ash, four nails of iron, five plow nails, five nails of timaru wood (the same wood from which Bhairav's staff is made). Next he invokes numerous local gods and *devtas*: the village god, the lineage god, Narsingh, Bhairav, Hanuman, and others, "so that none of them will complain that they have been left out." Now he is ready to perform the main ritual.

The family members sip water as part of their *samkalpa*. This purifies them, and now they are committed to the ritual and may not leave. A child runs to fetch more of the seven-grain mixture from a nearby house, and then Jagdish summons all the gods, especially the family god. He invokes Bhairava, and begins to worship Ganesh. He tells the family members to worship him with clear hearts. He emphasizes that they should have no hidden or bad feelings. He tells them to meditate on the sun (*surya*) while he recites the corresponding mantra. The mantra lists the names of Surya, and Jagdish instructs the family that while he recites them, they should think of the deceased man, the man for whom they have made the *murti*, and ask Surya and Ganesh to help transform him into a proper ancestor. They should pray to all their other ancestors, too, and ask for help, and for peace.

Jagdish proceeds to worship the twelve months of the year. (Later, in Heidelberg, he explains that the deceased person may have died in any of these



FIGURE 5.4. *Hamkar puja yantra:* the *yantra* is surrounded by an "ocean" (photo by William S. Sax).

months, but just to be on the safe side he worships them all.) He lists many different forms of sickness (*rog*) and prays that the family should be protected from all of them. He prays to the gods that both he and his clients be forgiven for all sins of whatever kind that they may have committed, and he requests them to give beauty, wealth, sons, health, and so forth. Then he directly addresses the gruesome image of the *hamkar*, shaking his finger at it and saying, "If you give us relief, then we will worship you. But if you continue to give us trouble, then we will punish you! It doesn't matter if you are a man, a god, or a ghost. It's not right that we should worship you over and over! Of course we have made mistakes—human beings make mistakes, after all—but please accept this puja." In the midst of Jagdish's speech the main client, the one whose wife is ill, declares that he has done nothing wrong. Jagdish continues, naming the village's Shiva temple, and asking Shiva to help them. Then he begins singing his ghostsong (see chapter 6), commanding the ghost to awaken in various *loka*s, or worlds. He mentions the names of many persons who died and were "caught" between this world and the next, including king Pandav. "You are being worshiped by the guru!" says the song. "You are being worshiped by the five witnesses, by the gods! Please eliminate our illness and suffering!"

Now Jagdish begins the worship of Kali, listing all the places where she manifests herself. He names the vehicles of the various gods, and the directions from which Kali and her assistants come. He asks Kali to close these directions so that evil beings cannot intrude. He recites the *ban* or "arrow" mantra, which lists dozens of harmful beings and conditions, after each of which comes the phrase *ban maro*, "Shoot it with your arrow!" Next comes the *ukhel* mantra in which minor *devta*s and spirits are awakened and invited to



FIGURE 5.5. *Hamkar puja yantra:* the *yantra* with a piece of bread on top of it (photo by William S. Sax).

come and participate in the ritual. The particularly fierce ones, says Jagdish, are sent to their respective places: to Haridwar, to the cremation ground, to the evil bazaar and to the rubbish heap (*bure bazar, khut kabad*).

In the midst of these mantras, the client's wife becomes possessed, but only very slightly. She leans against the wall, eyes closed, moaning faintly, but not articulating anything clearly. Jagdish turns and threatens the ghost that is posessing her. "If you don't accept this puja," he says, "there is always another way!" The client, husband of the possessed woman, continues:

> We are worshiping you like a mother, and if you don't treat us like a mother treats her children, then you must be some other kind of god. You are my mother. You are my sister's daughter[16]; therefore I am worshiping you the "straight" way. . . . I have not asked this Brahman to do anything bad to you, so you should not wish anything bad for us . . . whatever mistakes I did when I was young, please forgive them! I am making you an ancestor—please accept this puja! Don't make trouble! If by chance it is not you, then tell us! Tell us what and who you are! If you are someone else, then I've neither eaten nor drunk anything of yours, neither asked nor given anything. So, be peaceful! I've not stolen from you, nor have I taken anything. I'm only working this land and eating from it. If you tell me to get rid of this land, then I'll do that too. My *atma* is at peace; I am not deceiving you. If you are a goddess, then I'll worship you as such, with folded hands. The puja is straight, it's not crooked. I swear, if I do the crooked puja, may it be like the sin of cow slaughter!

The client is talking a lot, but his possessed wife is completely silent. In an effort to make the *hamkar* declare itself, Jagdish flings rice at her. He places some incense in the censer and hands it to the client, who waves it in front of the woman, saying,

> If you are my family goddess then say so, and still I'll worship you. But if you are someone else [i.e., not the *hamkar*], and you don't tell us who you are, then I will send you to a place where you will never be worshiped! Tell us—but if you're not going to tell us, then do not manifest here! And if you want to manifest, then tell us who you are! The guardian of the family is here; if you don't tell him now, then whom will you tell tomorrow?

While the client speaks, his brothers interject, emphasizing again and again that the puja is "straight," and not the "crooked" (*ulta*) form of the *hamkar* ritual. In the "crooked" version of the ritual, the image is put in a dirty place, perhaps a crossroads where people will walk over it, or perhaps covered with feces. (Jagdish explains later that although a "crooked" puja might work for a few months or even years, the *hamkar* eventually escapes and is then even *more* ferocious (*ugrarupi*), more dangerous, than before.) In any case they are doing the "straight" version now, and their emotions, says Jagdish, are: "We are eating your land, but we will take your name and sing your praises, and you should be peaceful. You should be our ancestor, our *devta*."

Soon they bring a goat, and while we are waiting, the client tells us that he has also invited the daughter of the dead man. He says that he is doing everything in front of her, in her honor, so that no one will retain any bad feelings. She is in fact sitting there among us, and says that she has come to her natal village to join the rest of us in performing this ritual. She asks the ghost of her father to heal the possessed woman's mind. While reviewing the recording in Heidelberg, Jagdish says, "Who knows whether it is really the god, or the people—but at this point all the anxiety, fear, and negative emotions have been transferred to the goat," which will now be sacrificed. The clients ask Jagdish who may eat the goat sacrifice, and he says that none of them should. Only outsiders, those who constitute the *panch*, the "five witnesses," should eat the sacrificial meal. He tells everyone to go home and have their dinner—they have no more work to do here. He circles rice over all of their heads, and tosses it on to the goat. It takes quite some time for the goat to accept the puja, but finally it does so with a vigorous shake.

Now I accompany Jagdish, the main client, and several neighbors into the rice fields to complete the ritual. This is done rather simply: a pit is dug in a particularly wet part of the rice terrace—it is important that a trickle of water

flow into it. Then the torn workbasket fragments, with the *devtas*' and the *hamkar*'s *yantras* drawn on them and their food placed on them, are tipped into the pit, and the guru pours the "water from seven sources" around it, so that the *hamkar* cannot escape. The client takes the dough-image of the *hamkar* in his hand and repeats the following *samkalpa* vow after Jagdish, swearing that he will complete the puja, and that there is no anger or jealousy in his heart, nor in the hearts of his family members, and affirming that they are at peace. "Hey my ancestor-deity, please remove whatever problems you have caused. If we receive peace, we will place your image at Badrinath, we will immerse it there. Through the Brahman, in front of the five witnesses, along with my family, in front of everyone, I am doing your *hamkar puja*." The point of all this, explains Jagdish, is to pacify the *hamkar*. Now the animal is sacrificed and its blood poured into the pit, along with a small coin that is the *dakshina* or ritual payment to the *hamkar*. It is important that the blood of the animal drip into the pit, and that one of his hooves be left there. This, says Jagdish, is the food of the *hamkar*. Now the *hamkar* has been transferred to the fields, where its ghostly energy can be transformed into fertility for the crops. In this regard, the *hamkar puja* resembles ghost rituals from South India (Uchiyamada 1999) and elsewhere (Bloch and Parry 1982). The *hamkar* should lie there undisturbed for three months, after which there will be another goat sacrifice, and then the ritual will be truly complete. But if the *hamkar* is disturbed in the meanwhile, there may be problems. After the sacrifice is complete, Jagdish does the "puja of the head [*sir*]," in which a candle is placed on the head of the sacrificial victim, a prayer is said for its *atma*, and the candle is blown out. All gurus do this ritual: some say it is for the sake of the animal, others that it is to eliminate the guru's sin at being involved with animal sacrifice. Jagdish and his brother Mohan always do the ritual very quickly; not, says Jagdish, because of any danger, but rather so that the animal can quickly obtain *moksha*, or liberation.

Animal sacrifices to the *bahiyals*, the fierce beings accompanying Bhairav and Nar Singh, resemble the *hamkar puja* inasmuch as an animal or series of animals is sacrificed into a pit in which the torn workbasket fragments with *yantras*, food offerings, and so forth have been placed (see chapter 3). In those cases, a rock is placed over the top of the pit to keep the *bahiyals* from escaping. But in the *hamkar* ritual, although the pit is filled in with earth, it is not covered with a stone. This is because the *hamkar* is being transformed into an ancestor, and therefore his path should remain open and unblocked. In the alternative, "crooked" form of the ritual, a rock is placed over the top so that the *hamkar*, who in this case is being punished, cannot escape. One must in any case be very careful, says Jagdish, because the *hamkar* is the "biggest deity, more dangerous even

than the *bahiyals*," even though their rituals are similar. They can eat people, too, he says. The mood of the puja is, "Eat this goat, not us!"

In chapter 4, I argued that "individualism" is a historically and culturally specific ideology that is often uncritically assumed to be a human universal. In this chapter, I emphasized that most ethnologists working in South Asia find the category of "the individual" of little use in understanding South Asian culture and society. Therefore it should come as no surprise that among South Asian Hindus, the object of ritual healing is typically the family and not its individual members,[17] a fact that is abundantly supported by the material in this book.

My evidence shows that family unity is a fundamental principle in ritual healing. It is a ritual principle both because it is a necessary condition for performing the ritual in the first place and because family unity is embodied and performed at crucial points during the ritual. It is a therapeutic principle because family unity is taken to be the result of successful healing, while disunity is a prime symptom of affliction. And it is a moral principle, the violation of which can have deadly effects. The unity of the family is not merely "symbolized" or "represented" in ritual. Rather, it is constituted and reinforced by means of it. Binding the family with rope, making collective vows, asserting the unity of the family before "the five" witnesses, placing the negative emotions of intrafamilial strife in the sacrificial object, performing the ritual at the border of the family's land, "eating (or not eating) the puja" together—all of these ritual actions add up to a collective, public definition of the family as a united whole.

Of course, family members are still discrete persons who pursue their own desires, who sometimes quarrel with each other, and who later seek reconciliation, often by means of ritual. One can perform a ritual insincerely, and this is a common theme in oracular consultations, where the oracle sometimes says that an enemy within the family has done one thing in public and another in private: "God on the lips but a knife at the hips" (*muh pe ram bagal pe chhurri*), as Gaurja Mai put it. In other words, there is always scope for deceit and failure, for the possibility that a single person will resist or even prevail over the collective. Nevertheless, there is clear and consistent moral pressure for particular persons to subordinate their interests to those of the family. As Dumont might put it, family unity is a fundamental value. This is true even of the dead, whose unfulfilled desires sometimes lead them to become ghosts. The goal of the associated rituals is to transform the unhappy ghost into a proper ancestor, and this, too, involves negotiation, reconciliation, and the (re-) unification of the family (see chapter 6). Whereas individuation is often the *goal* of psychological therapy in the West,[18] it is more often regarded as the *problem* in India.

This is clearly shown by the very name of the *hamkar puja*. *Hamkar* refers to a dead person's anger and jealousy, emotions that are sometimes so strong that they afflict the living, and cause the dead person to become a ghost. The term derives from the Sanskrit *ahamkara*, literally "I-ness," which is associated with egoism, self-interest, and identification with the body (see Desai 1989: 44–46). I find it quite significant that this abstract philosophical term is so widely used in this context to designate egotistic, "individualistic" emotions that are at the same time dangerous and destructive supernatural forces.

The combination of ritual healing, collective therapy, possession, supernatural affliction, ghosts, and exorcism discussed here will likely strike the reader as rather exotic. But I should like stress that from a comparative and historical perspective, such forms of affliction and healing are not at all unusual. Rather, they are typical of human experience across cultures and over the centuries.[19] Moreover, the subordination of the individual to the family or some other overarching entity is typical of most human cultures, at most times and places. Indeed, the exaltation of the individual is a peculiarly modern, European phenomenon, as Durkheim pointed out long ago. In India, by contrast, as in many other cultures, "individualism" is a problem to be solved, not a goal to be pursued. Modern medicine has reflected this atomization of society by focusing on individuals, and increasingly on particular parts of their bodies. It is often criticized for its ever-narrower focus and its neglect of the "whole person" along with his or her social relationships. It must be emphasized that such specialization has doubtless contributed to the considerable technical achievements of modern medicine. But biomedicine has its weaknesses as well as its strengths. Its strength lies precisely in its particularism, in the way that it carves up the world into ever smaller, measurable units, material essences that can be measured, weighed, and treated. Most of the time, conventional medicine does not view the whole person, but only the part. But ritual healing is different. Healing rituals unite what has been torn apart: the family, the village, the person. They unite the physical with the social, the social with the cosmological, and even with the spiritual. When a person is sick, he needs to be whole. He needs rituals.

6

Families and Their Ghosts

Ghosts do not wander aimlessly through Indian village culture: they gather at points of stress and attack the soft spots of the social order. To follow their movements is to learn a good deal about the social order.

—Morris Opler, *Spirit Possession in a Rural Area of North India*

If family unity is one of the foundations of ritual healing in Garhwal, what happens when a family member dies? It is a truism of ethnology that death rituals and related practices are oriented more toward the living than the dead; that they seek to re-organize social relationships that have been damaged by the death of a loved one.[1] In this chapter I will show how Garhwali beliefs and practices relating to death, ghosts, and exorcism accomplish this task. Fundamentally, they do so by transforming the ambivalent, dangerous ghost into a beneficent, auspicious ancestor.[2]

Like families everywhere, Garhwali families include the dead as well as the living. But although the ghosts of deceased family members are rarely seen anymore in Europe and North America, in Garhwal they are very much a part of life. Nearly all ghosts can be classified into one of two types: the ghost of a person who dies with unfulfilled wishes, or the ghost of someone who dies an untimely death (*akala mrtyu*). The second category includes those who have died violently or suddenly: a young person, for example, or a suicide, or a murder victim. Of course, an untimely death also implies

unfulfilled wishes, since it is assumed that such people were unable to fulfill all of their earthly desires. In both cases, it is precisely these unfulfilled desires that cause a person to become a ghost. Such ideas are very widespread in the cultures of the world. Laurel Kendall summarizes several cases from her research on the topic in Korea:

> A man who toiled to provide for his family vents his frustration at dying before he could enjoy the fruits of his labor. A first wife who knew poverty in her married life is bitter when she sees her husband's present wife living comfortably. Grandparents rejoice at the birth of a grandchild but regret dying before they could hold the baby in life. An old woman went to her grave craving a fancy rice cake and carries this hunger through eternity. By Korean social expectations, these are all legitimate desires that have been thwarted by fate (1985: 100).

Here one sees the deep ambivalence surrounding ghosts, an ambivalence that is also reflected in ghost rituals. The ghost is a beloved member of the family, but at the same time it is a threatening presence that, having been invited home, feasted, and worshiped, is then asked or ordered to depart. Ghosts are often invited to attend family rituals and feasts, but even when they are not invited they may appear unexpectedly, and they must then be placated before the ritual can be completed. The ghost is described as *ardhagati*, "halfway" or "stuck" (between this world and the next). Only when the ghostly body is transformed into an ancestral body will things be right again (cf. Uchiyamada 2000). The ghost afflicts the living in order to obtain its unfulfilled desires, and the living perform the ghost rituals, thus bringing its affliction to an end by satisfying its demands and, at the same time, releasing it from the "net of death" in which it is caught. In the ritual of ghost worship (*bhut ki puja*) that net is literally cut, transforming the *bhutakaya*—the dangerous and inauspicious body of the ghost—into the *pitrakaya*, or auspicious and blessed body of an ancestor. A piece of fisherman's net (or lacking that, a few bits of twine) is placed on the head of the possessed person and cut with a sickle. When the ritual works properly, the ghost identifies itself, asks after the health and welfare of its surviving relatives, and articulates its desires. Family members feed it and give it gifts, and it moves on to its next existence, having transformed itself into an ancestor (*pitra*), thus bringing its ambivalent existence to an end.

A Ghost Diagnosis

People often fail to realize that their difficulties and afflictions are being caused by the restless dead, with their persisting attachments and unfulfilled desires.

Only after consulting an oracle do they discover that a ghost is the cause of their difficulties, as can be seen in the transcript of an oracular consultation I recorded in 2002, which was later translated by the oracle, Surendra, himself. He was possessed by the deity Samin, and his client was a man from the Kohli caste, approximately forty years old, who consistently addressed the oracle as Bhagwan, or "God."

ORACLE (haltingly): Look, wayfarer, this inquiry is in relation to your own kith and kin, you haven't come bringing someone else's rice grains.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: It's an inquiry for the whole family, from the people to the animals.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, a *chinhana* [affliction] is moving on the woman's side.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: There is no serious trouble [*mudda*] there; neither among the women nor the elders nor the children. Look, wayfarer, the family is not prospering. Look, wayfarer, in this home there is both new land and old land. The house is also included in the land.

CLIENT: Please tell me these things clearly, one by one.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, there is one shrine, a second shrine, and a third shrine; and wayfarer, isn't there an important Bhairav temple [*bhairav chauki*] at the second shrine?

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: There is no prosperity, your minds are not working, your works are unsuccessful, your words are ineffective. Look, [you think:] "I don't need to take the rice in my hand, and no one is so sick that they are bedridden"—but still, wayfarer, you have troubles now and then.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan.

ORACLE: Look, you sometimes have affliction among the women, sometimes among the men, and sometimes among the children.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan, that's what's happening. Bhagwan, what is the reason for this?

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, you were supposed to do my worship collectively, you were supposed to perform my pilgrimage, but it has been delayed.

CLIENT: We've not delayed it, Parameshvari!

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, did you summon me to my shrine?

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan, we summoned you.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer: first of all, my deceased senior daughter [*kurm disha*]—the wife of the head of the family—has taken the form of a ghost. Look, I have made everyone prosperous [*bharpur*], but still sometimes there are difficulties.

CLIENT: Bhagwan, please do the inquiry so that you tell us which side it is from. [The client is asking whether the afflicting agent is from his own family, or from the natal family of his mother, the deceased senior wife.]

ORACLE: Wayfarer, the sickness and discord [*rog dvesh*] that is happening at the moment is from my senior daughter, who is currently moving about in a ghostly body.

CLIENT: Devta Bhagwan, is it the Bhairav of the senior daughter, or is it the Bhairav from the second shrine? Do we have to shift [*utthana*] him?[3]

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, the net of my senior son [*kurm babu*], the one who is the elder of the whole family, has not yet been cut.

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan, but your senior son is not yet dead.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, it's the net of my senior son [*kurm babu*], the one who is the elder of all [*rathali—gothali malik*]; it's because of him that the *devta* has become angry.[4] It's because my older senior son's net has not yet been cut.

CLIENT: But Parameshvari, at the moment the *devta* is not angry!

ORACLE: I'm telling you the truth: that the net of my senior son, the one with all the descendants, has not yet been cut! The god has been worshiped many times, but he is angry. You have not worshiped him in your name.

CLIENT: Bhagwan, when there is puja then we also take part. We offer coconuts and such things from time to time.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, my senior daughter—it has emerged here in my shrine that everyone's hands are empty—the animals as well as the people. A Bhairav came with this daughter, wayfarer!

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan, a Bhairav came with her. There is a Bhairav at both shrines. Yes, Bhagwan!

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, both are dowry Bhairavs.[5]

CLIENT: Yes, Bhagwan. *Now* the path has emerged [*ab nikala rasta*]! We did a puja for the dowry Bhairav, so that he would keep the whole family happy.

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, you will have peace when you supplicate my eldest daughter. Bhairav is her witness [*meri kurm disha ki taraf se bhairav sakshi hai*]!

CLIENT: Hey Bhagwan, your daughter is my witness [*disha sakshi hai*]!

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer: first summon my eldest daughter, and summon Bhairav at the same time—the Bhairav that belongs to my eldest daughter. My eldest daughter is the seniormost female of the whole family [*jhal-mal ki malkin*]. The *devta* is in a ghostly body now, wayfarer.

CLIENT: *Now* the path has emerged!

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, my [eldest] senior son's net has not been cut. And you can ask my senior son if the eldest senior son's net was cut, or not. When you do this, wayfarer, include my old senior daughter. Worship her, wayfarer, and "place your hands on your foreheads [*arpit hokar mathom hath de dena*, i.e., worship her, feed her, honor her, etc.]"!

CLIENT: Yes, it must be from my mother's side, right? Are we supposed to bind a bundle for her side?

ORACLE: Look, wayfarer, in my shrine there is no jealous curse (*hamkar*) and there is no dying curse (*jaikar*). Summon my elder daughter, and if your whole family does not prosper, then, wayfarer, you needn't take my name. And pacify Bhairav, wayfarer!

CLIENT: Actually, Bhairav danced in my home the other day, and we had a consultation with him then, too.

Here the oracle's analysis and advice was unusually clear: both the client's father's father and his mother had not "had their nets cut"—that is, they had not undergone the ritual to free them from the net of death. The client's mother had taken a ghostly body, and the Bhairav of her natal family was causing trouble on her behalf, as "her witness." The oracle advised the client to "bind a bundle"—that is, to make a vow—to both Bhairav and his mother's ghost, that he would worship them if they removed his afflictions.

The Ghost and the *dhyani*

I had been seeing ghosts in Garhwal for decades before I began this research, even though I was not aware of it. Here is the explanation: Traditionally, when

a Garhwali woman marries she leaves the home of her parents and takes up residence in the home of her husband and his parents (see chapter 3). But she still visits her parents fairly often, especially during the first months and years of marriage. These visits by the out-married daughter (*dhyani*) are associated with particular practices: various gifts and especially foods are exchanged between her natal home (*mait*) and her marital home (*sauryas*); she should be accompanied by a male during her journeys (ideally by her husband's younger brother, though her own brother or some other male relative can also perform this task); and she has much more freedom of movement and action at her natal home than at her marital home. When she leaves her natal home to return to her marital home, she is expected to weep, and this weeping takes a rather stereotypical form: a kind of loud sobbing, punctuated by deep breaths. I will never forget the first time I heard it, while riding a bus through the mountains. The woman in question had been dragged away from her parents' embrace and placed in the bus, and as it pulled away she sobbed as if her heart would break. But as soon as the bus turned the first corner and her parents were out of sight she stopped weeping, got out a compact mirror, adjusted her makeup, and began laughing and chatting with her escort.

Of course, feelings of sorrow and longing on both sides—the parents for their daughter, and she for them—are normally quite sincere, as are the proverbial tears of the *dhyani* upon leaving her parent's home. This is especially so immediately after her wedding, when she must be torn from the embrace of her parents and forcibly placed in the taxi or bus that is waiting to take her to her new home. But self-conscious *performances* of weeping, like that of the young woman I saw on the bus, are also rather common. Weeping at the time of departure is expected, and a woman who did not do so would be regarded as a "bad" daughter. During my decades of research in Garhwal, I have attended dozens, if not hundreds, of family rituals and other gatherings, and have often watched as a *dhyani* wept on the final day of a ritual, before leaving to return to her husband's home. But was I mistaken? Could it be that these weeping women were not daughters, but rather ghosts expressing their sorrow at departure?

My uncertainty is due to the fact that I cannot distinguish the weeping of a *dhyani* from the weeping of a ghost. I first realized this when Sacchu and I were analyzing a video I had made of a ritual. At the end of the video, the daughter of the host wept as she took her leave. I assumed that she was weeping as a *dhyani*, but Sacchu laughed, and said, no, it was a ghost that was saying farewell, the ghost of the ritual sponsor's wife's mother, who had lived with the family during the years before her death, was invited by the family to attend the ritual, and was now possessing the body of her daughter's daughter, weeping

as she said goodbye to her living relatives. I looked at other video recordings I had of ghosts, and realized that their style of weeping was, for me at least, indistinguishable from that of a *dhyani*. Moreover, both ghosts and *dhyani*s weep (or are expected to weep) for similar reasons: because of their sadness at having to separate themselves from those whom they love. Their social position is marked by a parallel ambiguity. The *dhyani* feels herself to be both physically and emotionally part of her natal family and place, and yet she is required to transfer her loyalties to her husband's family, and indeed to transform her body so that it becomes part of his family and place (Sax 1991, chapter 2). The ghost is stuck halfway between this world and the next, and weeps because it is still attached to its family, because it suffers in the "net of death" in which it is trapped, and cannot complete its transformation from a ghostly body into an ancestral one. How many times, I wondered, had I mistaken a weeping ghost for a weeping *dhyani* in the rituals I attended over the years?

Ghost Songs

The ambivalence of the ghost is a prominent feature of the "Ghost songs" which are sung as part of exorcism rituals in Chamoli District. Here are two such songs, which I recorded from local exorcists and translated with their help. The first was sung by Surendra from Gair Sain, and consists of three parts: an initial, spoken invocation, a second part whose verses can be sung in any order, and a third part that is only sung if the ghost becomes angry or threatening. A full transliteration appears in the appendix as text 5. Here is my translation:

1. Oh Lord, the god of my ancestors,
2. This is your home and your temple.
3. It is your seat and your protection.
4. In the underworld, in the world of men,
5. I will set you free from the net of Death,
6. From the noose of time.
7. First I honor your name, lighting incense.
8. Don't be silent in this home, your temple!
9. Without the mother's brother, there is no guest.
10. Without ancestors, there is no ritual, oh king of ghosts!

After this initial sequence, the exorcist begins to sing, accompanying himself on the *thali*. According to Surendra, the following lines can be sung in any sequence:

11. Awaken, oh ghost, in the land of mortals!
12. First, oh ghost, I light the incense in your name.
13. All your kith and kin are thirsty for the sight of you.
14. Don't be silent in this house, oh ghost, in this your temple.
15. If you utter the curse of truth, then may it fall on Death's door!
16. You were unique, oh ghost, as tender as the budding coriander.
17. If you utter the curse of truth, may it fall at Death's door!
18. May it fall on that evil god of death, who robbed you of your speaking soul,
19. [May it fall on] that sinful god of death, who took you from this golden world.
20. Have mercy on this house, oh ghost, oh storehouse of compassion!
21. Leave your ghostly body, take a godly body, ghost!
22. Empty is a city with no people,
23. And empty is a tree without a bird,
24. And house and home are empty when the family head is gone.
25. Our days and months cannot go on forever, ghost.
26. The seasons and the months return, but we do not return.
27. Leave your ghostly body, take a godly body, ghost!
28. And in your name we then will burn *kumkum* and *saturi*.[6]
29. The tree is ageless, ghost, but its branches are not ageless.
30. Of all the seasons, ghost, tell me, which one is your favorite?
31. The best of all the seasons is the Springtime, oh my ghost.
32. Twenty dozen flowers bloom, and the wild doves coo.
33. Awaken, oh ghost, on the ridgepole of the house!
34. Awaken, oh ghost, in the cowshed of the cows!
35. Awaken, oh ghost, in the pen of the buffalo!
36. Awaken, oh ghost, in the pond of milk!
37. That evil god of death took you far from all your children.
38. That sinful god of death split up the brothers of the family.
39. In the underworld, the overworld, oh ghost, I cut death's net!
40. And thereby I release you from the bonds of death, oh ghost!
41. My feet are itching, I have the hiccups [someone is thinking of me].[7]

Surendra said that it is rather dangerous if the ghost weeps too much. This indicates that it is upset and might curse the family or cause trouble in some other way. He says that when this happens, he sings the following lines:

42. Don't be angry with us, oh ghost!
43. Don't be so disturbed with us, oh ghost!
44. Leave your ghostly body, take a godly body now!
45. And in the coming months, we will send an invitation.
46. We will sing your songs, oh ghost, and give to you a dowry.
47. We will give a cloth for your head,
48. And clothing for your body

Similar themes are found in the ghost song of the guru Jagdish. He wrote down the following song for me in the fall of 2005, while we were working together in Heidelberg. Like the first song, it clearly illustrates a certain ambivalence regarding ghosts. It also refers to the ritual transformation of the ghost's body, and adds a mythical explanation for the origin of ghosts in general. The song begins with a description of the sun setting behind the Himalayas. Night comes, and a lamp is lit for the ghost as well as for various gods.[8] Lamps are lit in the most important holy places of Uttarakhand: Badrinath, Kedarnath, Haridwar, Joshimath. All the gods come to a great assembly, where they learn that Vishnu is pregnant with a son.[9] But Vishnu is ashamed of his pregnancy, and so Shiva sends his wife Parvati to visit her family, and transfers the embryo to her belly, after which she either aborts or gives birth to it (the song is ambiguous). Shiva uses a knife made of wild cherrywood (*payyam*, a holy plant used, among other things, to control ghosts) to cut the ghost in two. He throws one piece into heaven, but the other piece remains "stuck" in the mortal world. Soon the effects of the ghost's curse begin to be felt: weeds begin to grow in the fields, the milk curdles, and the yogurt spoils. The singer urges the ghost to accept its death, to accept that whatever lives must also die. He promises to release the ghost from its tragic and painful existence by cutting the net of Yama. He promises to worship the ghost, and he asks for its blessings. Finally, he commands the ghost to leave the mortal world, pass through the various heavens, and finally reach Badrinath in the high Himalayas, where he will dwell for a time in Narad Kund. This is a natural pool in the Alakananda river, where gurus like Jagdish deposit "liberated" ghosts in the form of small silver images (see chapter 5, "The Man Whose Land Was 'Eaten'" and below, "A Ghostly Trial"). Finally, the ghost is commanded to follow the road that leads even higher into the Himalayas, beyond Badrinath, to the sacred lake Mansarovar.

A transliteration of the original song is reproduced in the appendix as text 6. (I have used boldface type to indicate lines that the guru emphasizes by changing the tune as well as by increasing the length of the words in the line.)

1. The day from the east has returned to the west, and the sun has set behind the mountains.

2. The shadow has settled in the ravine,
3. The shadow has reached the high Himalaya,
4. And the Himalayas' shadow has reached Manasarovar.
5. It is the time of evening prayer, when the cows return home.
6. Now is the time of the gods' evening prayer.
7. Now is the time of the gods' ritual.
8. Now is the time to give lamps to the gods.
9. A lamp is lit in the name of the ghost,
10. A lamp is lit for the god of the family,
11. A lamp is lit for the god of the land.
12. A lamp is lit for Narayan of the window,
13. A lamp is lit for Ganesh of the doorway,[10]
14. A lamp is lit for Hari Haridwara.
15. A lamp is lit for the five river confluences,[11]
16. A lamp is lit for Shiva on Kailash,
17. A lamp is lit for Nilakantha Nepal.
18. A lamp is lit for nine-linga Kedar,
19. A lamp is lit in Gaurikund,
20. A lamp is lit in Kalimath,
21. A lamp is lit in cold Joshimath.
22. A lamp is lit in the ashram of Badri,
23. A lamp is lit for the five-named gods.
24. Hari Bhagwan lives in Haridwar,
25. The five-named gods in the [five] river confluences.
26. Bhole Shambhunath[12] lives on Kailash,
27. Guru-ji Gorakhnath lives on Nilakantha,
28. The Goddess Parvati lives in Gaurikund,
29. Mother Kali lives in Kalimath,
30. Fierce Narasimha lives in Joshimath.
31. The five-named gods' assembly convened.
32. Indra left his throne and reached the assembly,
33. Brahma left his world and reached the assembly,
34. Shiva left Kailash and came to the assembly.
35. The Pandavs of Jayanti sat in the assembly.
36. Kunti's son Bhim sat in the assembly.
37. What is the matter of which Bhim Sen speaks?
38. "Vishnu Bhagwan gives birth to a son!"
39. But Vishnu was shamed [by the birth of this son].
40. What is the matter of which Shiva speaks?
41. "You go, my Gaura, to your father's home!"

42. **And Gaura reached her father's home in Rishasau.**
43. She reached "Sandy Bank" in Rishasau.
44. **And the ghost was born on "Sandy Bank."**[13]
45. The goddess returned to Shiva's Kailash,
46. And then Shiva asked her,
47. "Where did you leave the child of your womb?"[14]
48. "I left him below, at Sandy Bank."
49. Shiva took a dagger of wild cherry-wood
50. And went down below to Sandy Bank,
51. **Where he sliced the ghost into two pieces!**
52. He threw one piece in the world of heaven,
53. He threw the other piece in the mortal world,
54. And that piece got stuck in the mortal world.
55. *Duba* grass grows in the fields above the village;
56. The curse of the ghost lies upon them.
57. *Bubala* grass blooms in the fields below the village;
58. The curse of the ghost lies upon them.
59. **The curse of the ghost in the yogurt and milk.**
60. The ghost is stuck in the mortal world.
61. The ghost is halfway; it's the curse of the ghost.
62. In the mortal world is the curse of the ghost.
63. He receives no worship in the mortal world,
64. He finds no path in the mortal world,
65. **The ghost is stuck in the mortal world.**
66. **The ghost is halfway, its curse is upon us!**
67. Please ghost, don't bring your deadly anger.
68. He who is born must one day die.
69. **The tree is not immortal, nor are the world's ages.**
70. **The ghost is halfway, his curse is upon us!**
71. The child Vinayak got stuck and then died,
72. And likewise the curse of the ghost is upon us.
73. Dasarath died with his hundred fine sons,
74. And likewise the curse of my god, the ghost, is upon us.
75. King Pandav of Jayanti got stuck and then died,
76. And likewise the curse of my god, the ghost, is upon us.
77. He receives no worship, he finds no path,
78. He is stuck halfway, in the mortal world.
79. **Please ghost, don't bring your deadly anger!**
80. In the belly of the death-time, no words are spoken.
81. In the belly of the death-time, the eyes do not see.

82. In the belly of death you cry out,
83. "Please, someone, cut this net!
84. Death, you separated me from my beloved companions!
85. Death, you separated me from my brothers and my friends!
86. Death, you separated me from the child in my lap!"
87. We will call you for worship and send you away.
88. The nine nights of Navami, and puja on the tenth.
89. The winter will come, and the music of the season.
90. Take away our bad thoughts; give us good minds!
91. Give success to the people and livestock!
92. Leave the world of men and go the world of death!
93. Leave the world of death and go to the world of heaven!
94. Leave the world of heaven and go to the world of the ancestors!
95. Leave the world of the ancestors and go to the world of Brahma!
96. Leave the world of Brahma and go to the world of Shiva!
97. Leave the world of Shiva and go to Vishnu's heaven!
98. Now the ghost will go to the Ashram of Badri.
99. In the Ashram of Badri, he will dwell in the hot spring,
100. In the Ashram of Badri, he will dwell in Narad's pond,
101. In the Ashram of Badri, he will dwell in the lake of the sun.
102. In the Ashram of Badri, he will dwell in the lake of milk.
103. Now the ghost goes to Vasudhara Falls,
104. Now the ghost goes to Satopanth, to Manasarovar.

That concludes the worship of the ghost.[15]

Both songs emphasize the sadness and tragedy of death. As the first ghost song puts it,

22. Empty is a city with no people,
23. And empty is a tree without a bird,
24. And house and home are empty when the family head is gone.
25. Our days and months cannot go on forever, ghost.
26. The seasons and the months return, but we do not return. . . .
29. The tree is ageless, ghost, but its branches are not ageless.
30. Of all the seasons, ghost, tell me, which one is your favorite?
31. The best of all the seasons is the Springtime, oh my ghost.
32. Twenty dozen flowers bloom, and the wild doves coo.

Death is also a tragedy for the living, who mourn their lost relative. And the ghost suffers too—it is in a kind of hell. That is why, when it appears, it often wails and moans. As the second ghost song puts it,

80. In the belly of the death-time, no words are spoken.
81. In the belly of the death-time, the eyes do not see.
82. In the belly of death you cry out,
83. "Please, someone, cut this net!
84. Death, you separated me from my beloved companions!
85. Death, you separated me from my brothers and my friends!
86. Death, you separated me from the child in my lap!"

The purpose of the ritual is to release the ghost from this state of suffering, so that it may go on to become an ancestor, to transform its ghost's body or *bhutakaya* into a "divine body" or *devakaya*. The cutting of the net is performed partly out of compassion, but also out of fear of the ghost, who can be a source of danger. After all, the reason people worship the ghost in the first place is because it is afflicting them. This is hinted at in the song, which mentions the ghost's curse, and the agricultural pests, weeds, spoiled milk and yogurt, and other evils resulting from it. Even though the ghost sometimes means well, its contact with the living can nevertheless be harmful. This is reminiscent of the Korean ghost beliefs described by Kendall. As the Koreans say, "The hand of the dead is a hand of thorns." Kendall gives further examples from Korea: "A mother pities her married daughter's poverty and touches her, driving the daughter temporarily insane. A grandmother fondly strokes her infant grandchild, causing the baby to sicken. A father-in-law reaches out in gratitude to the young man who married his hunchback daughter, but the grateful touch of the dead makes the young man lame" (1985: 100). This is the ambivalence of the ghost: Even though it is loved and cherished, even though it is regarded as a member of the family, nevertheless its presence is dangerous and harmful, and it must be encouraged, cajoled, and sometimes forced to move on to the next stage of its existence.[16] The net has been cut, and the ghost is now free to move on, but before that, two things must happen. First of all, the ghost must speak. It must identify itself, otherwise the suspicion remains that it might be some other kind of malevolent creature, perhaps even a demon. In many of the cases I saw and recorded, the ghost had to be persuaded and cajoled for hours before it identified itself, and even then the identification was usually less than clear. There was often a lingering doubt about the effectiveness of the ritual, and therefore grounds for subsequent exorcisms at some later stage.

There is a second thing that the ghost must do before it moves on to its next existence: it must accept a gift from the living. In every case of ghost worship I have seen, some kind of gift is given, or at least promised, to the ghost, so that it will go away and leave the family alone. As soon as it has identified itself, the family members immediately begin asking what it wants: A meal? A new sari?

A bowl of milk? An invitation to the next festival? "Just tell us what you want," they say, "and we will gladly give it to you. Only you must tell us clearly!"

The musical style of the ghost songs also reflects the ghost's fundamental ambivalence. A low-caste guru normally plays the *huraki*, a small hourglass-shaped drum with two goatskin heads, the tightening straps of which are attached to a harness which he wears around his back, so that when he plays the drum he can, by pulling on the straps, cause it to make an unusual *vhoo! vhoo!* sound, which is especially effective in invoking the spirits. He is accompanied by a man called a *thakalyor*, who plays an inverted metal platter with two wooden drumsticks; and also by a third man (*bhamvar*) who echoes the final lines of each verse of his song. During much of my fieldwork, I performed this third role, which was quite advantageous because when I sat next to the guru, I could observe the gods close up and in detail, while they danced in the bodies of their possessed devotees.

A high-caste guru like Jagdish does not play the *huraki* drum, because the drumheads are made from animal hide, which is polluting. Instead, he plays an inverted brass pot, often without accompaniment. In both cases, however, the music is (or should be) sonorous and melodic, and indeed many of the gurus' songs are very "catchy," intended as they are to encourage people to become possessed and dance. But the ghost songs are different. The guru sings alone, and he plays neither the sonorous *huraki* nor the inverted pot, but instead bangs on the *thali*, which, unaccompanied, soon becomes very irritating. The words of the song are gentle and full of love, but the music is harsh, rattling, disturbing. The words say, "We love you," but the music says, "Go away!" This is consistent with local ideas about the function of music in possession rituals, which is normally meant to be pleasing to gods and others, but in this case is quite discordant. Nothing so clearly expresses the ambivalence of the ghost and its rituals as this music, which repels even as it attracts.

A Mother and Her Daughter

How is the ghost ritual actually performed? Perhaps the best way to describe this is to quote directly from my (lightly edited) fieldnotes of March, 22, 2002:

> Three days ago I left Bhakunda, and stopped at Kaldu where my friend Kushlanand joined me. We took an open-air taxi with a dozen others and reached Mayapuri at about 3:30 in the afternoon. On the way we passed through Nauti bazaar. It was the first day of the annual Hariyali fair, and I kept my head down as we passed through,

hoping that no one would recognize me, since they would almost certainly want me to stop and give a speech (or sing a song) on the stage that had been erected in the bazaar.

When we reached Mayapuri we saw Guru Darpal, sitting and gossiping with some other village men in Bhandari's tea stall. Darpal told me that he was about to go ghostbusting, and I was happy to have the opportunity to do some serious fieldwork after several weeks' absence. I apologized somewhat sheepishly to Kushlanand, abandoning him to the tender mercies of Darpal's wife, and asked the driver to return the way we had come. This time Guru-ji was sitting next to me, and I hid my face again as we passed through Nauti. The only one to recognize me was another exorcist, my old friend Mahanand, but I gave him the guru's signal (flat hand pounding closed fist, as though playing the *huraki* drum), and he smiled. Guru-ji and I reached the path to Chakroli Village, climbed out, and walked down the steep mountain path in the fading light.

The origin of the ghost was as follows: a young woman from the Ironsmith caste had a breech-birth six or eight years ago, and they took her to Ranikhet hospital, where she died in labor. Her husband married again, and had several children with his new wife, but maintained regular relationships with his deceased wife's family. Several months previously the dead woman began to appear in the dreams of her aged mother, who is, as they say in Garhwali (using the English term), very *sentimental*. The old mother saw her daughter face-to-face in her dreams, and the daughter asked her, "Why don't you ever call me?" so the mother promised that she would do so. It took her a few months to save enough money for the ghost puja, but finally she did, and in the springtime she managed to locate and summon Darpal. The husband said that his dead wife had become an ancestor in his home, but here in her natal village she was still a ghost. (In other words, she was troubling her natal family, but not his.)

"What is a ghost?" Guru-ji asks me rhetorically. "Ghosts come into existence when the body is abandoned but the person's thoughts [*kalpanaem*] remain." I ask him why ghosts bother people that they loved, and he answers that it is indeed a matter of love. They love those that they have left behind, and want to visit them. They are summoned and made to dance, and they are given their favorite foods and other gifts. Their desires are satisfied, and they are given a chance to meet their surviving family members. But if their relations with their loved ones were bad, they can cause a lot of trouble.

Darpal enters the village both as a healer and as a well-known guest, someone who has been here many times before and who has various kinship relations with local people. As soon as he arrives, he chats with the villagers about previous rituals he has performed, what the results were, and so forth. He says that he was in a nearby village only a couple of weeks ago, having been summoned by a Brahman client, despite his low caste. The Brahman's son had been diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent home from the army. Darpal recited some mantras and performed other rituals, and within a week, he says, the son received his orders to return to duty. It occurs to me that these conversations might be understood as his way of "drumming up" business.

One of the social niceties being practiced here is that everyone asks Guru-ji if he is "angry." Now, this is common in Garhwal: for example, when a guest leaves, one often says, "Please don't be angry"—that is, don't be disappointed by the meager hospitality—but in this case, when people ask Darpal if he is angry, it is actually a polite way of asking why he didn't come earlier. After all, they have been trying to summon him for more than a week. He replies by listing all the rituals he has done over the past few days, trying to make them understand how busy he has been. Eventually we reach the house of the old woman who has summoned him, and discuss the problem with her. She begins by recounting her attempts to summon him, emphasizing how difficult it was. (Later I come to learn that when clients speak of these rituals, they nearly always dwell on the difficulty of summoning the guru.) Finally, she says, a little bird in a tree told her that the guru was at home that day, and she sent someone to fetch him.

When I ask her how she learned that the ghost of her daughter had returned, she answers, "Hey Ram! She died at the age of twenty-two! How should I have known that I would have to weep for her again? [The old woman begins weeping as she speaks.] She came into my dream, and asked when I would call her. She was angry—she kept asking why we didn't call her. She asked us to call her during the Bhagwali festival. My oldest son, Madan, was there [in the dream] and said that he would call her on [the festival of] Bhagwali. He promised that we would call her, but I didn't have enough money to do it then. And she said, 'I'll come, mother. I'll come, mother.' My eyes shut, and my mouth and ears both closed right up [i.e., she couldn't hear or speak]". Guru-ji asks the old lady if she has consulted

an oracle, and she says, "They did so at her husband's house. And it came out that the ghost was troubling me. But why should I consult an oracle? She's there, right in front of me."

The old woman loves to talk about supernatural things. About how she saw Jamnu Baba, a form of Bhairav, sitting on the trail one night, crouching on the ground, black as coal, and how he asked her to make sure that his boots were polished. About some local man who recently did a ritual for Jamnu Baba, but died soon after. She keeps returning to how difficult it was to locate the guru. There was a "wall" between her and the other gurus X, Y, and Z, she says, but she finally managed to summon Darpal. He says that he has personally worshipped and established all the local gods, that the old woman's shrine is under his control, and therefore that there is no necessity for worship, because these gods will not afflict her. Once, he says, he was here doing puja when the fierce *devta* Samin possessed someone and began to dance, speaking very loudly. Samin frightened the crowd, who fled indoors, but Darpal says that he stayed outside and used his mantras to stop Samin dancing. He tells the old woman that "a palanquin will go," meaning that he will do a *chhal puja* [see chapter 3, "Exorcising the Crafty Demons"] for her. He tells her that she should make a vow to do the *chhal puja*—after all, it doesn't cost much—and her problems will cease. When she and her family members reply that they don't want to do the full ritual with a goat sacrifice, he suggests that perhaps the deity is vegetarian, and they could then worship accordingly, in the month of Chait, or perhaps Mangsir. When the flowers bloom, he says, they should collect a bunch of blossoms along with water and incense, circle the house with them, go to the ridge high above the village, offer the flowers along with water in the four directions, and thereby rid themselves of this noxious forest goddess. (Later it will emerge that the woman is actually possessed by Jamnu Baba, and the guru will retract this initial diagnosis.)

All kinds of people from the village drift over to Guru-ji with their problems, fears, and anxieties. One girl has come from her husband's home, along with her small child. She relates how her husband's elder brother's wife, to whom she was very close (and who later died) keeps appearing in her dreams and troubling her—"strangling" her, as she puts it. She asks the guru to make an amulet to protect her. A woman with a sprained ankle tells us an alarming story: a few days previously, she went to milk the cow in the morning, and saw that someone had left a pot of rice and lentils in the

cowshed, and had smeared red powder on the stake to which the cow was tied. She called her husband and they ripped out the stake and tossed it into the woods, then brought the cows down to their house, where they still were. Naturally she and her family were disturbed by this weird occurrence. Who would do such a thing, she asked? Guru-ji's first response is measured: "It's probably just someone trying to frighten you; perhaps someone who wants to take the cowshed away from you. And if it's just a fight between humans, then what can I do? It may bring harm to me!"

Later the woman brings three chunks of hard salt, and the guru begins to utter mantras over them. While doing so, he coughs and spits rather violently, and I think, "How disgusting! I wonder if I should describe the crudeness of it all when I write it up?" It seems to me that the faces of the clients betray their disgust as well. But then Darpal's hacking and spitting increase dramatically, and he says to them, "I've really earned my keep today—this alone was worth two or three thousand rupees"—and I realize that he has drawn the poison, or the bad energies, out of the salt. When I ask him what it was, he replies that it was someone's "thought" (*kalpana*). Later he tells the clients to mix one piece of salt with the cow's food, to place a second piece on the path on the way to their cowshed, and to burn a third piece in their domestic hearth. When Darpal recalls this conversation later that evening in a neighbor's house, the people there claim to know nothing about it, but it is obvious that they are only feigning ignorance. He clearly regrets mentioning the incident to them, since it only involves him in the internal politics of the village, and he quickly changes the subject.

Gradually, I begin to suspect that these things—the sprained ankle, the business with the cow and the smeared blood, and so forth—are the real "mystery" that lies behind the summoning of the guru. And I can see that Guru-ji, too, is trying to work out the connections between all of these incidents. His first guess is that the dead woman's husband is actually the one afflicted, and that it is he who will be possessed by ghost. (Later, this guess proves to be incorrect.)

On that first evening, Darpal and I are treated to some wonderful hospitality. We are served salad and fish for dinner (the clients know that he loves fish), along with a glass of rum and some pleasant conversation. Darpal keeps hinting that I might be able to pay for a big ritual. I wish he wouldn't do this—paying for a ritual would be

neither professional nor appropriate. Of course, I am always willing to help, and indeed I think that it is my moral obligation to do so, but only anonymously, and only when the sponsor himself bears most of the costs. Eventually we pack ourselves into a tiny room, no more than three meters square, and Guru-ji begins to play his *huraki* drum while someone else accompanies him on the *thali*. The first god to dance is Jamnu Bhairav, and he dances in the body of Madan, the old woman's eldest son and the senior male of the family. After he is finished, Guru-ji says, "I control this god! He is also in my shrine at home. I am his boss, and he will do as I say. He has promised that he will look after this land and this family." Later he praises my voice to them, and they ask me to sing, and so I perform Garhwali folk songs to them for several minutes, while they film it on my video camera.

Next morning we wait a long time for Madan, who has promised to return by 1:30. But he fails to show up, and so eventually we proceed without him. The main task to be accomplished is the worship of the ghost. Since Madan is gone, the surviving husband acts as the *jajman*, or ritual sponsor. Darpal expects him to be possessed by the ghost, and they wave some incense before his face, trying to bring him into trance, but he does not react. Indeed, he seems curiously distant, even depressed, and says little. More and more villagers squeeze into the tiny room, nearly all of them women and girls. Eventually there are more than twenty people in the tiny space, packed knee-to-knee as the guru plays his drum and sings out, his face covered with sweat from his exertions, showing the brilliant smile (*hansmukh*) that is the mark of a competent guru. Soon the dead woman's ghost possesses her mother, the old woman who organized the ritual. She begins to weep, then moves to the center of the room and embraces her family members one after another.

Now comes the central ritual, the cutting of the net. The idea is that the ghost is "caught" in the net of the god of death, and must be released. A small piece of fishing net is placed over the old woman's head, and cut with a scythe. Then she is given milk and food, and oil for her hair. This helps to "cool her down," so that her possession does not become too violent or extreme. She is also given bangles, a necklace, and a piece of plain white cloth that is said to be a "new sari." All these gifts are intended to show the affection of the living for the dead. When the ghost comes, they ask her over and over what she wants. They want her to declare her needs—perhaps she wants a

special sweet, or a favorite meal of rice and lentils. The women sitting there, crowded knee-to-knee in the tiny room, assure her that they have “taken care of the shawls.” They are referring to a time before the ghost died, when her natal relatives gave her three or four shawls that were later taken from her in her husband’s home. Evidently this is the one thing the ghost really wants. Did she already mention it in another ritual, or to someone in a dream?

Now the ghost starts conversing with the women gathered in the crowded room. This is an emotional climax, a discussion between the living and the dead in which feelings of grief, sorrow, and loss are freely expressed. The idea is that the ghost should interact with the living, that he or she should “catch up” on their news, on the things that have happened since the ghost’s death. Then, having said what needed to be said, the ghost should move on to the next stage of its existence, either in the afterlife or in a new birth. The village is small, and most of the women are related to each other in one way or another, as sisters-in-law, aunts, and so forth. These women knew the ghost intimately when she was alive, before she died so young, so tragically. Many of them weep uncontrollably, pouring out their grief at the untimely death of their “little sister.”

A second ghost now possesses a woman in a yellow sari, who rolls about on the floor, weeping and gasping with a tight, choked voice. It is the ghost of a man who died after being attacked by a bear that clawed away his face. This ghost is careful not to show his mauled face to the assembled people—he is ashamed of it, even in death. S/he rolls about on the floor, carefully keeping his face covered, and pointed toward the ground. Then, as the guru continues to sing and play his drum, the ghost of the deceased woman (still possessing the body of her mother) shares some food with her husband. It is like a Hindu wedding where, at the end of the ritual, bride and groom feed each other by hand. It seems that the marital tie between living husband and deceased wife is being re-affirmed. After this exchange of food, the guru circles a handful of rice over the possessed woman’s head and throws it outside, thus removing negative and inauspicious influences. Then he and the other participants take a short break to have a smoke.

After some time, they begin to play a song for Bhairav, and once again the old woman is possessed, this time by the family deity, a form of Bhairav, rather than by the ghost of her daughter. She bares her breasts while shouting “The family! The family!” She is the

eldest family member, and many of those present were weaned from her breasts, so this association of the family deity Bhairav with her breasts makes sense, even though he is male. The women packed into the tiny room begin to ask the god personal questions: about their own health and that of their loved ones, about runaway children, about marital and economic problems, and so forth. They are poor, uneducated, and of very low caste, and there is so much suffering in their lives! They pose their questions to this god possessing the old woman, but I can see the skepticism on their faces, and in their bodily postures—after all, the old woman is their neighbor, their relative, even their mother-in law.

The *devta* blesses himself by placing rice grains on his own forehead. In the meanwhile, Dinesh's wife is starting to show the signs of imminent possession. But suddenly the family god, in the body of the old woman, shouts at her, saying that her possession is a fake: "It's a lie! It's a lie!" S/he hurls rice grains at Dinesh's wife, who becomes even more powerfully possessed. Yesterday she complained that her whole body was getting cold, as if snow had fallen on it. Now I realize that she was signaling her imminent possession. Later, we will learn that this was the first time she was ever possessed. She hunches over, her jaw jutting forward, and begins to scratch herself frantically—the sign of Kachiya, god of filth. Speaking through her, the god says, "I am here in my house, and I will remain here! The god is separate from the woman! I will wait here until you call me again. But there is no curse, no curse from me!"

And then something rather astounding happens. The old woman suddenly breaks her trance and, in a normal tone of voice, tells the guru about her dispute with Dinesh's wife. This has to do with a rather trivial argument some time ago when the young woman dug up some trees planted by the old woman, as a result of which the two of them have not spoken for years. And this, she tells the guru, is the reason why she doubts the authenticity of the young woman's possession. Later, when I suggest to Darpal that "one can't tell whether the god was speaking or the human was speaking" (i.e., the old woman seems to be using the opportunity to vent her personal enmity), he insists that it was certainly the god who spoke.

In order to prove that she really is possessed, the young woman asks for glowing coals from the hearth, which she rapidly pops into her mouth, one after the other! She then proceeds to answer the questions of the other women sitting in the crowded room. She

> smears ashes from the coals on the forehead of the ghost's husband and hurls rice grains at him, trying to compel him to become possessed. But she is unsuccessful, and he remains reserved and distant, as he has ever since we arrived. Finally, the participants seem to be convinced of the authenticity of the young woman's possession. She hugs the old woman, and they are reconciled.
>
> Soon the dancing is over, and the atmosphere immediately becomes normal. There is virtually no "cooling down" time. Guru-ji makes five leaf-plates, each containing a different kind of food: bread, milk, rice pudding, and vegetables and fried snacks without salt. He marks each plate with colored powder, and lights a lamp. The he recites a mantra over the leaf-plates of food, takes a bit from each plate and wraps this in a sixth leaf, and tells the ghost's husband to go and put this last leaf—the ghost's portion—under the eaves of the house. He marks everyone's foreheads with colored powder, and is marked in turn by the ghost's husband, still acting as the *jajman* or ritual sponsor. The rest of the food is distributed to members of the family, who consume it. I'm quite pleased with myself—I've managed to record all the main events, and have only one minute left to spare on my very last DVD mini-cassette.

I found it remarkable that Darpal made so little money—less than two hundred rupees—for performing this ritual, even though he took three days out of his very busy schedule to come here and do it. But although he didn't leave with much cash, he clearly enjoyed himself, and he was able to help several people with their problems. He also created a number of obligations that he might be able to "cash in" at a later point in time. For me the experience was exciting and productive because was the first time that I had seen the "cutting of Yama's net," which was in this case quite successful: the ghost identified herself, spoke to the living, and accepted the gifts that were offered. Later I suggested to another guru, Jagdish, that the net-cutting ritual was merely symbolic or metaphorical, and he answered, "You can do whatever you want, but until that net is cut, the ghost won't speak."

One of the most striking things about this séance was the intensity of the emotions that were expressed: not only the mourning of the participants for their deceased "little sister" but also their anxieties about their personal problems, their deep feelings of family unity, and the emotional conflict between the old woman and her son's wife. The exorcism was a kind of ritual therapy based on a figure of ambivalence—the ghost—who was part of three worlds: the world of the dead, of the natal family, and of the marital family. Recall the

husband's remarks about the dead woman being an "ancestor" in his home (in other words, she didn't trouble them) but a ghost in her mother's home. It is partly this ambivalence that makes ghost rituals so powerful, since participants can draw on many meanings in constructing their own interpretation of events.

A Ghostly Trial

Several of these themes are also illustrated by another exorcism I attended, the most disturbing one I ever saw. The background story was tragic, and began with Madan Singh, who moved in with his wife's family rather than bringing her into his own home. He was therefore a *ghar javaim* or "house husband," and an object of some disdain.[17] To make things worse, he had no children of his own, and perhaps it was precisely this sonlessness, widely regarded in India as a tragedy, that resulted in his chronically bad behavior. Madan Singh drank a lot and he fought a lot, and I never once heard anyone say anything positive about him. His younger brothers Prahlad Singh, Narayan Singh, and Bhula Singh lived in the family home in Sukhet, along with a sister who had been born between Narayan Singh and Bhula Singh. All of them were eventually married. The youngest brother, Bhula Singh, married a Rajput girl from nearby Dhanpur and brought her to live with them. But terrible things happened to her in that unhappy family. She was regularly beaten and abused, and because she was weak, and couldn't bear such a horrible existence, she finally killed herself. She had planned everything beforehand; she even had the rope and ladder ready on the day she died. She used to sleep with her husband's sister while he was away in the military, because the sister was unmarried at the time. But that morning Bhula Singh's wife got up early without even waking the sister, went to a nearby tree, and hung herself. Next day, the villagers discovered her body. Some people whispered that Madan Singh had killed her, but Jagdish told me he didn't believe this rumor. After the young wife's suicide, the family experienced all kinds of misfortune: sickness, economic loss, bad luck, and so forth. They consulted several oracles, and it emerged that the source of their problems was the dead woman's ghost. But she wasn't the only ghost in their home. At the time of her suicide, Madan Singh's old mother was still alive, even though both her hands and her feet were lame, but when so much sorrow came into the home it broke her heart. She died, and became a ghost, too.

The evening before the séance, Jagdish and I had taken the bus into the mountains of Nagpur and walked for three or four hours through the dark, before reaching a village where he performed a *hamkar* exorcism (see chapter 5,

"The Man Whose Land Was Eaten"). The next day we descended the steep and lonely mountain paths all the way to Gauchar on the banks of the Alakananda River, where we spent a few hours enjoying the annual fair before returning to Nauti late in the evening. Jagdish wanted nothing more than to go home and take a well-deserved rest, but he had mentioned that a client was requesting an exorcism, and I was very keen to see it. I kept urging and cajoling him, and finally he gave in, so that we arrived at MadanSingh'a 's home, well-fortified by country liquor, shortly before midnight.

A former village headman was already there, and he asked me to record him singing a rather gentle and charming folksong, which I did—such an incongruity in light of the dark rituals that followed! At around 1:30 or 2:00 in the morning, Jagdish began the ritual by assembling the proper materials: the seven-grain mixture, along with *bhujela, ginjar,* the *ikadya ront, khichadi,* and barley flour from which he fashioned the image of Masan. The foods are intended for the ghost, as well as for the dangerous and threatening beings that might accompany it. They are, of course, foods of a peculiar sort. No salt, chilies, or spices are included, making them rather tasteless and unattractive to the Indian palate. Jagdish said that although many of these foods would be both inauspicious (*ashubh*) and impure (*ashuddh*) for humans or gods, this was not true of the ghost or the beings that accompanied it. It was just "their food [*un ka ahar*]"; it suited them. Therefore, he said, the ritual was not inauspicious.[18]

Next, Jagdish filled a basket with barley grains, placed a small clay lamp on top, and lit it. He said that barley is regarded as the "seat of the lamp" (*dipak ka asan*), and is very pure. Bhairav is the *dvarapal* or "doorkeeper" who protects the ritual participants from danger, and therefore one must always start the ritual by praying to him as lord of the lamp. Jagdish also produced a tiny silver image and placed it in the basket, on top of the barley grains. Later, the ghost would be transferred to this image and immersed in the holy waters of Narad Kund at Badrinath.

Now Jagdish begins to play the ghost song transcribed earlier in this chapter, accompanying himself on the *thali*. He told me later that this was a kind of *avahan*, a summoning of the god; it was meant to "give a hint" to the ghost that she should appear. After this, he applies *pithaim* to everyone present: Madan Singh, his younger brothers Prahlad Singh, Narayan Singh, and Bhula Singh, their wives and their sister, the former headman, and me. He continues to play his ghost song, and when he reaches the part where the ghost is commanded to awake (line 8), he looks directly at Bhula Singh, the surviving husband of the suicide, expecting him to become possessed.[19] Bhula Singh shudders and looks as though he is about to cry, but does not fully enter trance. After a few minutes Jagdish stops for a cigarette break, then says to Bhula Singh, "The

ghost comes when you're eating, she comes when you're sleeping, she comes when you are at the fair—so why isn't she coming now?" But Bhula Singh does not respond. He sits motionless, almost frozen, staring straight ahead, appearing to be nearly but not quite possessed. Jagdish resumes playing the *thali*, but still the ghost doesn't come. He announces loudly that either the ghost should come and say what she has to say, or she should stay away permanently. Madan Singh now threatens the ghost more, saying that if she does not appear, he will do a ritual to punish her.[20] Jagdish echoes this threat, and so do the others. They say they will "hinder" the ghost (*bhed karna*) if she does not appear, they tell her to forget her anger and go straight to heaven. One of the younger brother's wives says, "If you were a *devta* [i.e., if you were a proper ancestor rather than a ghost], you would say something. You're not speaking; you must not be a *devta*. . . . some time ago you were possessing people simply when they mentioned your name—so why aren't you coming today? Speak your mind! Don't keep anything back! We are doing all this ritual [*karya*] together, so why aren't you coming?"

But still the ghost does not appear, she does not speak, and so Jagdish resumes playing his *thali*, trying to summon her. After some time, one of Bhula Singh's brothers' wives waves incense in front of him, asking the ghost to manifest herself, still expecting that she will possess him since he is her husband. But this has little effect on him: he shudders once or twice, and is again silent. In the meantime, however, a ghost begins to possess the sister who used to sleep next to the suicide. She has recently gotten married, but has come home for this ritual. She begins to weep, and so does Bhula Singh. Later while studying the videos, Jagdish says that at this point, Bhula Singh was indeed possessed by his former wife, while his sister was possessed by their mother. The elder brother's wife, who had just been pleading with the ghost to manifest herself, is confused by the simultaneous possession. She waves the incense rather halfheartedly in front of her mother's ghost, now possessing the body of her husband's younger sister. The girl stops crying, and then starts again. The older woman adds clarified butter to the incense holder and waves it before her once more. Watching the videos, Jagdish says the young sister is no longer possessed by the mother, but rather by the suicide. He can tell that it is a different ghost because the sister stopped crying and then started again. The mother "showed herself," says Jagdish, and then left.

Now Madan Singh addresses the suicide's ghost in the body of her husband, his brother (though it seems to me that he is also addressing the ethnologist and the former headman): "Tell us if someone beat you or killed you," he says. But Bhula Singh is no longer possessed, and Madan Singh looks around and asks, "Ghost, where did you go?" Bhula Singh just sits there without

expression. One of the women asks the ghosts to please come one at a time, not all together: it confuses her. Soon the younger sister's trance also stops. After a few minutes, Madan Singh is possessed by Siddhnath, his own lineage *devta*. Jagdish says that this is the god upon whom the suicide called when she killed herself, asking him to make sure that the family "had no peace." The bodily posture of the god, as he possesses Madan Singh, looks rather like Kachya, with hunched back and claw-like hands. But Jagdish, watching the videos later, says that this posture is just a manifestation of Siddhnath's anger. The second brother, Prahlad Singh, waves incense in front of Bhula Singh once more, and says, "If you are a *devta*, then come! If not, then go away!"

Now Jagdish waves incense in front of everyone, and the sister is possessed by her mother's ghost. The god Siddhanath, in the body of Madan Singh, is agitatedly encouraging her to come over Bhula Singh. (Jagdish later told me that the ghost of the suicide should have done so.) But Bhula Singh remains silent. Jagdish takes the incense burner and kneels directly in front of Bhula Singh, saying, "What is it? What is it? If there has been some mistake, then say so! Otherwise, appear! Why aren't you dancing?" Rather than singing the 101st line of the ghost song, he recites it like a mantra: "In the Ashram of Badri, he will dwell in the lake of the sun!" He tells the ghost possessing the sister to identify itself, and I shudder in horror when Siddhanath, speaking through Madan Singh, puts his fingers around his neck as though they were a noose and shouts out, "It's her! She's the one!" Jagdish interrupts to request the ghosts to possess just one person at a time. Siddhnath/Madan Singh assumes a threatening, aggressive posture, and shouts out, "You are always causing trouble, always claiming that I never worship you!" Bhula Singh waves incense before the ghost, now clearly possessing his younger sister, whose weeping and wailing is growing louder. With a note of desperation in his voice, Madan Singh says,

> If we did something wrong, or killed you, then say so! We brought her to beautify [*sajana*] the family, not to kill her! The whole world says we killed her; that we hung her in the tree. She just died—what can we do? Of course we did not kill her! . . . The mistake was yours, not ours! You are the one who went away! If we killed you, if we drove you out, then say it openly, because people suspect us. They are blaming me! Your husband was away at that time. Say it in front him—say it in front of Bhula Singh!

Now Bhula Singh and the ghost embrace. The scene is very moving, and the former headman whispers tenderly, "When you died, you were thinking of your husband, weren't you?" Bhula Singh's elder brother's wife tells him

to prepare the materials for the net cutting ritual, and they do so, hoping to cause the ghost to speak, and identify itself with certainty. Madan Singh keeps haranguing her: "It's not as though we actually forgot you! After you died, we made you a *pitragadhi*.[21] We did it for you! If we killed you, or drove you out, then say it! Say it in front of us!"

Now Jagdish addresses the ghost, attempting to persuade her to give up her ghostly body: "What's happened has happened. Give us your speech [*bolchal*], give us your blessing [*chhaya maya*]! Become an ancestor! Become a *devta*!" He promises to take the ghost to the river at Karanprayag or at Badrinath, and says, "Speak! Tell us what you want!" The others sitting in the dark, cold room affirm that they will give the ghost whatever she demands. But she does not speak; she only continues to weep loudly. Jagdish tells them to give Ganges water to the ghost. "We will take you to Prayag," he says, "We will take you to Badrinath. We have worshiped you; what more do you want?" They give her a few sips of Ganges water to cool her down, and they massage her neck while her husband wipes the tears from her face with his handkerchief. Finally, and after a great struggle, she manages to say, "You never give me anything!" and begins to weep very fiercely indeed. Jagdish continues singing his ghost song, while the others sitting there beg her to tell them what she wants, to "become a *devta*." She seems close to speaking, and everyone encourages her. Madan Singh says, "If we were at fault, then say so! If he [Bhula Singh] was at fault, then say so! Tomorrow we will take you to Prayag! Tomorrow we will do your funeral rituals [*pinda dan*]!" Jagdish says, "He [your husband] was not mature at the time, he was just a child" [otherwise he would have taken you with him]. The ghost continues to lament: "You don't give me anything! [*kucch ni den*—you don't worship me as an ancestor at the appropriate times]." At precisely this moment, Madan Singh's wife (who has been quite active and forceful until now) begins sobbing bitterly, and I wonder if perhaps this is because what the ghost says is true, that the family has neglected to honor her. In any case, Jagdish says, "They'll give it, they'll give it. Why shouldn't they give it?" and Madan Singh echoes his reassurance: "We will give you whatever you want: bangles, a hairpiece, clothes, anything!" I am struck by how much the ghost's behavior is like that of a child. She wants things from the people around her, and makes a fuss until she gets them. She keeps repeating, "You give nothing! You give nothing! I can see—you give nothing!" and Jagdish replies, "It is our mistake. Forgive us—now we will give to you. Don't keep these sad memories [*kanksha*] in your mind—we will give to you! Don't afflict us any more! We will certainly give offerings to you. Don't give any more trouble; protect your family. Your husband is also a child; he is still a child. Protect him! Tell us! Tell us what you want! Don't keep any jealousy in your heart!"

But the ghost just keeps on weeping, and repeating, "I didn't get anything! I didn't get anything!" while the family keeps promising to give . . . and it goes on like this for a very long time indeed. Madan Singh gradually becomes more aggressive. You can see it in his threatening body language, leaning over his much smaller sister, as if he were about to strike the ghost with his fist! "Did we ever kick you out? Did we ever trouble you? Did we kill you and hang you on the tree?" But none of this has any effect: the ghost continues to wail, and to complain that she has received nothing, the exorcist keeps urging her to protect the family and especially her husband, they keep promising to give her a sari and a blouse, to remember her always. Her husband says, "You did something horribly wrong," and she counters, "You gave me nothing, that's why I did it." The guru urges the ghost to "be peaceful, be peaceful. You won't ever give troubles to this family, to the people or the animals, will you?" and she shakes her head and says, "No, no [I won't]." Madan Singh says, "I've spent at least twenty thousand rupees, so you'd better stay peaceful!" (Watching the film more than a year later, Jagdish half-jokingly suggests that perhaps he was referring to money spent in bribes.) "We will always think of you when we bring fruits and flowers here," he says. "We will offer cloth to you." He tells the other family members that they should offer clothes at the tree where she hung herself. "You can put them on your ghost body," he says, "or you can wear them as a shawl—it's up to you. We are doing all of this to bring peace to your soul."

Eventually the woman's trance ends, and Prahlad Singh's wife massages her feet. After awhile, the guru resumes playing his ghost song, and soon the sister is possessed again. But this time, Madan Singh's attitude is completely different, no longer threatening but instead quite tender and full of sadness. This is because it is now his mother possessing the younger sister, and she hugs him—something that his younger brother's wife would never have done.[22] She weeps, and Madan Singh dries her tears with his handkerchief. Prahlad Singh says, "Our whole family is assembled, mother, to worship you." Bhula Singh begins to weep, and the ghost says "Oh my son, oh my son! I had to leave my boys, but now I've seen my son!" The guru urges her on, saying, "Don't keep these sad memories in your heart! These people are doing everything for you! You *should* see your sons—it's good that you see them! Look at them all, don't keep any bad feelings in your heart, keep them prosperous and happy . . . Your grandchild is also here, the one you have never seen."

They place the child in her lap and she strokes him fondly, then the ghost moves from one daughter-in-law to the next, hugging them. The trance is brief, and the guru says that, after all, she is an old woman and should remain calm.

She shouldn't over-exert herself. They give her milk to drink, the former headman leaves, and the rest of us sleep for an hour or so.

At dawn we rise, drink a hasty cup of tea in the freezing cold, go to the fields for our toilet, and quickly bathe. Then we reassemble in the same room, and the guru begins the next part of the ritual. He recites a mantra into some red and yellow powders, then applies them to the lamp, symbol of Bhairav, to the small silver image in which the ghost will be placed in the name of the "five gods," to the god of the land (*bhumyal*), to the lineage deity, to himself, to the *thali*, to the two sticks of wild cherrywood with which he plays the *thali*, and finally, to all the participants. He chants a mantra in Sanskrit, in order to "bring peace" to the ghost, then recites the names of many different holy places, commanding the ghost to "awaken" in each of them, then he begins singing his ghost song.

Soon the youngest sister is again possessed, and Madan Singh tells her to ask for whatever she wants, but not to afflict them time and again. Which ghost is it, I wonder? It must be the suicide, because she first embraces her husband, who strokes her face and dries her tears. Jagdish tells her to stay peaceful and quiet. "If you want to speak," he says, "then speak! It was no one's fault, only yours. Whatever mistake was done, it's the family's mistake. Stay in heaven! Stay peaceful! It's all right to come once, but not twice or thrice. Don't keep on coming and giving trouble to your family!" Bhula Singh puts *pithaim* on her forehead—precisely what one does to a guest before they leave. Then the guru places offerings in two *thali*s, one for each ghost. The offerings consist of a cooked sweet (*naivedya*), fried snacks (*svali pakodi*), flowers, and Ganges water. Now they expect the mother's ghost to possess her daughter. Bhula Singh offers incense to her, Jagdish begins singing his ghost song, and soon she is possessed. They bring a piece of plain black cloth (a "blouse," black being the appropriate color for a widow) and hang it around her neck. She hugs her son Bhula Singh, and then Madan Singh. Soon Madan Singh is weeping freely, and all her children begin addressing her as "mother." After some time, Madan Singh says to her, "Everything is ready, tell us what you want! We are taking you to the river—why are you so angry? Why don't you tell us? Speak!" This seems to be an important negotiation, as the family once again strives to persuade or cajole the ghost into communicating her desires. This continues for some time, until the ghost finally looks as though she is about to speak. She struggles, stammers, tries to speak again and again, but cannot articulate the words. The family members are straining to hear; the room falls silent with anticipation as the ghost finally expresses that which has kept her *ardhagati*, in limbo, stuck between heaven and earth: "I miss you so much [*myar kati khud lagi*]!"

Now they all begin weeping copiously, and so do I. Madan Singh says, "If you miss us so much, then why did you die?" After some time, the mother's ghost asks after her daughter Devaki, and one of the other women there informs her that it is actually Devaki whom she has possessed, and through whom she has been speaking!

Soon the guru begins singing again, attempting to invoke the ghost of the suicide. Bhula Singh drapes red cloth over his own shoulders—he is required to touch it before it is used in the ritual. The sister is possessed again, and Bhula Singh strokes her tenderly as if she were his wife. Madan Singh apologizes to her in his own way, saying he is sorry that "there was a bit of fighting in the family, but you shouldn't have gone and killed yourself!" He promises that Bhula Singh will worship her when he next returns from the army, that he will offer her a sari, blouse, food, milk, and so forth. Meanwhile the women of the family console the ghost: one woman strokes her throat while another spoons milk into her mouth. This seems to end the trance, and Devaki puts her shawl back over her head like the proper, auspicious wife that she is in daily life.

Now the trance is over, and series of more intense ritual acts begins. The guru tosses rice into the four corners of the room, thus purifying it, then asks for his puja materials. He gives a purifying sip of water to each of the family members assembled there, and they perform the *samkalpa*, the vow to complete the ritual. Bhula Singh holds in his hand the tiny silver image into which the ghost will be transferred, while Jagdish prays to the earth, to a pot filled with water, to Bhairav, to Ganesh, to the lamp. All family members offer rice grains into the flame of the lamp. The *kartta*, the official "doer" of this ritual, is Bhula Singh, because he is the son of the one ghost as well as the husband of the other. The guru worships Ganesh, then the ancestors, then he "enlivens" the silver image. During this part of the ritual the family members join hands, and later Jagdish explains to me that in fact this enlivening (*prana pratishtha*, literally, the "establishment of breath") is, as it were, "empowered" by the collective energy (*shakti*) or strength (*bal*) of the family. The image is placed on the red cloth—the one associated with the suicide—and a few hours later Bhula Singh takes it along with the other ritual materials and accompanies the guru (and of course the ethnologist with his video camera) to the river at Karanprayag, where a complete *pinda dana* ritual is performed. *Pinda dana* is the term that is used to refer to a class of rituals in which deceased persons, represented by dumpling-like balls of flour, are worshiped and united with the ancestors, by mixing the balls with another, larger one. In this case, the balls were made of barley-flour, and Jagdish said that this was the standard practice for a *pinda-dana* ritual in this region—though he also mentioned that at Badrinath, they

use rice-flour balls. Eventually, he says, the silver image would be deposited at Badrinath or Haridwar.

In this chapter I have tried to illustrate the fundamental ambivalence of the ghost. Ensnared in the "net of death," as well as by its own unfulfilled desires, the ghost is *ardhagati*, halfway between heaven and earth. It afflicts its living relatives, who perform rites of exorcism in order to transform the dead person's ghostly body into the body of an auspicious ancestor, thereby establishing proper relationships between living and dead family members as well as ending their own affliction. The ambivalence of the ghost has to do not only with emotional attachment and desire, but also with existential danger. The ghost is trapped by its unfulfilled desires as well as its attachment to the living, and the family, too, is "trapped" by its continuing attachment to the ghost. Although these attachments involve positive emotions of familial love, they are nevertheless dangerous. They cause affliction and suffering, and so the rituals of exorcism that seek to sever these bonds once and for all are therapeutic for both the ghost and the living. They are therapeutic for the ghost because they release it from its suffering so that it can become a benevolent ancestor, and they are therapeutic for the living because they bring to an end the suffering that is caused by the presence of the ghost.

As I showed in the last chapter, family unity is a fundamental moral and ritual principle that leads to health and well-being, and yet even when this unity is present, it is constantly being disrupted by death. A ghost exorcism is therapeutic because it reestablishes proper and healthy relations within the family, clearly dividing the living from the auspicious ancestral dead, without the inauspicious and ambivalent ghost lurking somewhere in between. This ambivalence is expressed over and over in the songs and rituals associated with exorcism. In the last chapter, we saw that although a ghost should be worshiped in the "straight" way, with love and respect, family members and exorcists are not reluctant to threaten it with the "crooked" form of worship that will confine it in a filthy place, should it refuse to accede to their requests and depart. In this chapter, we saw that performance of the ghost songs clearly express this ambivalence by combining gentle, loving words with music that is intended to drive the ghost away.

But in the two preceding descriptions of ghost exorcisms, there were hints of another attitude that seems to belie this explicit cultural model: I refer to the idea that possessed persons may simply be using the exorcism ritual, instrumentalizing it, to pursue their own private ends. In "A Mother and Her Daughter," we saw how the old woman used her own possession by the lineage deity in order to pursue and legitimate her ongoing quarrel with her son's

wife, accusing the younger woman of faking her possession. In "A Ghostly Trial," Madan Singh tried to use the exorcism to establish his innocence of the accusations of murder that had been made against him by his fellow villagers. He demanded that the ghost say clearly, in front of the former village headman and the ethnologist, if she had been murdered by him or his family. There was a similar case in "Chandri's Story" in chapter 3, where the low-caste woman's father's younger brother, a very sympathetic character, seemed to "instrumentalize" his possession in order to reassure his niece that Bhairav would protect her.

The notion of instrumentalization raises a fundamental question about possession in general. If possessed persons use exorcisms and similar rituals to pursue their personal goals—that is, if they instrumentalize the rituals or the possession state itself—then perhaps possession is merely pretense, and native theories about it are mystifying ideologies. Rather than taking seriously the idea that a person's body has been temporarily taken over by an external being, perhaps we should simply regard possession as just another strategy for attaining personal goals.

Such issues were raised in Ioan Lewis's classic book *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (1971), as well as in the critical response to it. The thesis presented by Lewis in this book is subtle and complex, but the debate that followed it focused on his idea that so-called peripheral possession cults were a means for relatively powerless people to express their dissatisfaction and/or to obtain a measure of power and authority. Lewis's ethnography was based on the Zar cult of Sudan, a female-centered possession cult that, according to his analysis, gave women access to certain luxuries, and was also a "thinly disguised protest movement directed against" men (1971: 26). Although Lewis extended his hypothesis to include marginalized and relatively powerless males, it was his remarks about female possession that generated the most critical discussion (e.g., Wilson 1967). Other authors, too, have suggested that possession cults are instrumentalized by their participants for personal ends, and these authors have in turn been criticized for suggesting that possession-related behavior is nothing more than a conscious, cynical manipulation of cultural beliefs for personal ends.

So which level of explanation is to be preferred: the level of shared cultural assumptions and explicit theories about possession, or the level of calculating personal strategy? I believe that this is a false dichotomy, and that the notion of strategic practice as developed by Bourdieu helps us to avoid it. According to Bourdieu, it is practice and not belief that is primary. Of course a given cultural practice can always be rationalized in a *post hoc* manner in terms of belief. In the case at hand, one can ask about local theories of possession, about why

exorcisms are performed, why they usually include the giving of a gift to the ghost, and so on. As generations of ethnologists can testify, the response will usually be astonishment at the stupidity of the question, followed by an answer along the lines of "That's the way we do things." Occasionally one gets lucky and has an eloquent informant, who (as desired) derives local practices from beliefs: "We do *x* because we believe that *y*." But this is only a concession to the ethnologist's strange question, which he asks because he assumes that religion is basically a matter of beliefs that can and should be rationally evaluated. However as W. C. Smith (1964) showed many years ago, the idea that religion is fundamentally a matter of *belief* is a thoroughly modern, European idea.[23] If we really want to understand why people do what they do when they practice religion, we will do better to use practice theory. As Bourdieu puts it, practice has its own logic, and this is not the logic of the propositional statement. Rather, the logic of practice has to do with its articulation in a particular social field: Who engages in which practices, with whom and for what reasons? The reason for engaging in any particular practice, says Bourdieu, is normally strategic. People seek to maintain or improve their position in a social field. This is hardly surprising: humans pursue their own interests, and why should we expect otherwise? But according to Bourdieu, the self-interested dimension of practice is often systematically denied or, as he puts it, "misrecognized." Now, it is neither novel nor particularly earth-shaking to observe that people often misrepresent their actions, that they dissimulate, that they do one thing while claiming to do something quite different. So why invoke Bourdieu? The important idea here is that misrecognition (*meconnaisance*) is sometimes fundamental, that it is necessary, that the system cannot work without it. One of Bourdieu's best examples is the dinner invitation. We may pretend that our motives for inviting someone to dinner are purely disinterested, but in fact such invitations are part of a moral system of reciprocal exchange. If one does not return the invitation within a certain period of time, then very soon he will find himself socially isolated. We know this, but we act as though we do not. The system depends on the misrecognition of strategic invitations as "disinterested." Without it, the strategic system of giving and receiving dinner invitations would collapse.

Another example is that of cross-cousin marriage. In many cultures, including that of the Kabyle among whom Bourdieu conducted fieldwork, cross-cousin marriage is held to be the most honorable form of marriage, something for which every family strives. But in practice, those who are chosen for cross-cousin marriages to be less desirable as marriage partners, perhaps because of some physical or mental defect, or the poverty of the family. By marrying such a person to his or her cross-cousin, parents can claim to be honoring tradition, even as they save a great deal of money by keeping the celebration small and

within the family. Strategic ends are served, even as they are misrecognized as fidelity to Kabyle "tradition."

Can we apply this idea to possession and its associated rituals? I find it quite plausible that a person could consciously subscribe to ideas about possession, participate in exorcism rituals, and even feel himself to be possessed, while still behaving "strategically" by utilizing the ritual for his own purposes. However, this strategic practice would have to be misrecognized. As Bourdieu puts it, practice does not comprehend its own logic. A Kabyle father would never admit that in arranging a cross-cousin marriage for his daughter, he was actually making a virtue out of necessity, because if he did so he would undercut the very logic of the practice, which is related to its situatedness in a social field, and not its propositional content. Did the old woman and Madan Singh instrumentalize the ghost rituals in which they took part? Of course they did. But neither of them would or could acknowledge this, because if they did, then the very basis of their strategies—their presumed possession by supernatural beings—would be undermined. Nor would a guru acknowledge the frequency of instrumentalization among his clients, because if he did so, the basis of his calling would be undermined. Instrumentalization is neither conscious nor deliberate, nor could it be, otherwise it would undermine itself. In general, we can say that ritual activity is strategic in the Bourdieuian sense that *all* practice is strategic, but the strategic aspects of certain kinds of rituals must sometimes be misrecognized, otherwise the system would be undermined. We have already seen a similar misrecognition in the ghost songs, where the words say, "We love you!" while the music says, "Go away!"

The ethnologist Elizabeth Schömbucher (2006) complains that despite their relativistic tendencies, ethnologists usually join the chorus of other scientists who ask, "What *really* happens when someone is 'possessed'?"—a question that already defines the "native point of view" as false. This runs against the professional and ethical duty felt by many ethnologists to give as much respect as possible to native theories and experience. So when I write that people sometimes misrecognize the strategic dimension of their possession-related practices, does this mean that their theories and understandings are false, and that I, as an ethnologist, know better than they what is actually going on?

Well, it does and it doesn't. If it is true that practice does not comprehend its own logic, then those engaged in possession rituals may not be aware of the strategic dimension of what they are doing, even though the ethnologist is. But this is like saying that the speakers of a language are not always aware of its grammatical rules, even though the linguist is. Just as the speaker of a natural language need not be aware of its formal structure in order to successfully use it,

so the participant in a possession ritual need not be aware of all of its sociological implications in order to perform it. To put it differently, acting strategically does not imply that one deliberately, cynically manipulates cultural ideas and practices for one's own purposes. The conscious motives and personal experience of possessed persons might correspond rather closely to native theories of possession, without ceasing to be at the same time strategic.

7

Sending the God Back

This chapter is about rituals of aggression, that is, rituals intended to harm a rival or an enemy. Such rituals include cursing, sorcery, feeding someone "rubbish," or summoning gods to attack him.[1] To perform such rituals is to behave immorally, especially when the object of the curse is a family member. I will argue that there is a kind of ambivalence built into such rituals, and that this ambivalence is indeed a necessary part of them. As soon as one utters a curse or performs a similar act of ritual aggression, one is in an ambivalent position. The act is immoral, but one cannot acknowledge one's own immorality, and therefore the rituals (and indeed the entire language of the system) are organized in such a way that aggression is regularly understood (or reinterpreted) as defensive rather than aggressive. One crosses a moral boundary and commits an immoral act, but the cult allows one—even encourages one—to represent that act as moral and legitimate.

The practices described in this book constitute a moral system involving justice, sin, punishment, and revenge. Bhairav and Kachiya Bhairav are "gods of justice" who defend the weak and take revenge on their powerful oppressors. Ritual attack and defense are integral parts of this system, and defending oneself is permissible, while attacking another person is not. Such ritual aggression occurs often enough, but it is thought of as immoral, especially when directed against members of one's own family. That is why, in order to preserve their moral status, those who engage in ritual attack—whether

as clients or as gurus—construe their actions as purely defensive. They *misrecognize* these actions precisely in the Bourdieuian sense discussed in the previous chapter, and, moreover, without such misrecognition the moral basis of these rituals of aggression would collapse, and with it the system itself.

Several different kinds of cursing are practiced in Chamoli District. One of them, called a *ghat*, is an intentional curse meant to harm someone else. There is a standard idea about the sort of person who "places" a *ghat*, and how they do so. According to the stereotype, such a person is weak and in an extreme situation, with no other way of defending him- or herself. The person uttering the curse goes to the god's shrine, excavates the sacrificial pit (a site of concentrated violence) and weeps, so that his or her tears of rage and suffering drip into it. S/he then says "Oh Kachiya, Oh Lord, if I am the guilty party, then strike me dead, here and now! But if my enemy is guilty, then bring him to my shelter!" (In other words, "afflict him, so that he comes to me and begs for forgiveness!") Such curses may also be uttered in moments of emotional conflict and turmoil without going to the shrine and then subsequently forgotten, as we have seen in previous chapters (e.g., "The Forgotten Curse," in chapter 3).

It is instructive to consider the rhetoric of such a curse. Formally, it has the same structure as a vow: "If you do X, then I will do Y." In making a vow, one seeks personal benefit in return for religious action, by saying something like "If you cure me, then I will worship you," or "If I pass the exam, I will make an offering at the temple." In the curse, however, the desired end is harm to one's enemy, and the condition for achieving that end is not a ritual or an offering, but rather a moral state: "If I am innocent and my enemy is guilty, then punish him!" Ostensibly (and doubtless in the mind of the person uttering it) the curse is a kind of request or petition directed towards the *devta*, and one guarantees its truth by offering oneself as a potential victim, should one be at fault: "Oh Kachiya, Oh Lord, if I am the guilty party, then strike me dead, here and now!" But it seems clear that at another level, the curse is directed to the self. By putting oneself at risk in the event of actual guilt (that is, by inviting the god's punishment if one is guilty) one convinces *oneself* of the justice of one's position, and of the legitimacy—even the morality—of the curse. Cursing is wrong, and everyone knows it, but the rhetoric of the curse is designed, at least in part, to mitigate or excuse this immorality, by misrecognizing a fundamentally immoral and antisocial act as an act of justified self-defense.

There are other kinds of ritual and spiritual aggression in addition to the *ghat*. One of the most important is *hamkar*, a kind of embodied jealousy or egotism. *Hamkar* is not a deliberate curse; rather, the term refers to persistent and unresolved feelings of jealousy, anger, and resentment. An extensive description of one case was presented in chapter 5, "The Man Whose Land Was

Eaten." In that case, the *hamkar* was that of a man who died without sons, and whose land was then taken over and "eaten" (farmed) by his brother's sons after his death. His frustration at his lack of sons, and his jealous feelings toward his brother who *did* have sons, were combined with resentment that they were now "eating" (from) his land, and so he returned as a kind of ghost to afflict them. The family worshiped him in the "straight" (*sulta*) way, seeking to transform him into a benevolent ancestor. But they did not hesitate to threaten him with the "crooked" ritual form, which binds the afflicting spirit in a filthy place, should he not accede to their requests and depart. (The "crooked" form is also said to be the only effective form when the *hamkar* comes from a living person, as in "The Curse of Jealousy" below.)

As I have argued in previous chapters, family unity is a fundamental moral and ritual principle in Chamoli District, and that is why cursing within the family is highly ambivalent. When the exploitative person is someone from outside the family, then one may curse him without necessarily suffering any bad consequences. But when the source of injustice is a family member—an estranged brother, a cruel mother-in-law, a rival sister-in-law—and one curses that person, then one always suffers terribly. Stories of such curses within the family are common, and they always end tragically, with the person who utters the curse (or someone close to him or her) suffering the god's wrath. This affliction ends only when the rival parties come together to worship the god; that is, when the family is reunited.

A Curse within the Family

One example of a family curse was recorded by the guru Sacchu; the speaker is an elderly widow who came to him seeking his services.

> My eldest daughter lived in Diyar Kot, and one day her husband came and said, "I am taking my wife home!" My husband was rather hot-tempered, and he replied, "Look, you—today you've suddenly become a husband [*aurat-wala*], but you didn't even think of your wife for the past seven months! What, were you dead until today, you 'husband'?"
>
> We were inside, warming ourselves by the fire. It was winter, and bitterly cold. From inside, I called out to my husband, "Come on, brother, keep quiet! After all, our daughter *should* go to her husband's house—why are you saying such things? In the end, their children belong to our son-in-law and his parents. People are listening! Stop, and think what you are saying! You can discuss it tomorrow!"

But our son-in-law said, "I haven't come to listen to you people! Don't waste my time with such matters—I've merely come to get my wife. I won't eat your food, and I won't even take a glass of water from you! Now please be so kind as to tell me where I may sleep, otherwise I will go somewhere else." My husband said he would discuss it with him next morning. Everyone ate their dinner except our son-in-law, who went to sleep without eating anything. We couldn't get him to eat, so he went to bed hungry.

In the morning everyone went about their work, but once again the matter of my daughter arose. Our son-in-law said that they would go straight home, because he was hungry. At this, my husband became angry, and once again they started to argue. They both got so angry that they said terrible things, and began to push and shove each other, and when they did this our son-in-law shouted out, "What, you're hitting me? You're raising your hand against me? I'll take you to court! Who do you think you are? I've paid for your daughter,[2] and still you won't send her to my home? OK, I'm going, but watch out—today I will afflict you with a demon for the rest of your life!"

After that I prepared my daughter [to leave], and I said to her husband, "Son-in-law, my daughter is ready. You two can leave now. Please don't make a scene here! Go, please go! Don't make our enemies happy!" But he replied, "Your enemies will be very happy when they see what happens, understand?" After a lot of argument, we accompanied them along the path to bid them farewell. Now, my Bhairav's *than* lies along the path. I don't know if my son-in-law had planned to do so or not, but as soon as we reached that place, it was as if he had become crazy, and he ran straight to the *than*. We said "Hey, son-in-law, what are you doing?" But he didn't talk to anyone. He ran straight to the *than*, and I don't know what he did there. When he returned he didn't speak to anyone.

Several years later we found out that a *devta* had come from Bamoth [to afflict us]. Now, why would those people send a *devta* from there to here? As soon as we found out about it, we summoned the god and asked him, and he [his oracle] said, "It was the fault of those two men. When they come to me together for shelter, then I will become peaceful. And just watch! Within a week, my *dhyani* will be afflicted in that place. They have a goddess [*bhagavati*] there, and they rely on her, so they think that she will not allow me to go there, but I am watching them! Look, on that day my son

> [*botya*, i.e., the son-in-law] came to my *than* and called on me, saying, 'Those people have stopped my woman [from coming home], and they are ready to attack me! Hey, *devta*! The king regards everyone equally [*raja sabke saja*]. Please make your judgment!' That's what he said, and that's why the *devta* is now afflicting both parties. There will be peace [only] when both of them, the son-in-law and the father-in-law, join together and worship the *devta*; otherwise there will be nothing but trouble [*hani*] on both sides."
>
> After that we sent someone to our son-in-law's house, to tell him that he had made a mistake. [Our message was,] "If we had known, then we wouldn't have let you go to the *than* that day, but now we have found out what a mistake you made: now take the fruit of that evil deed and come to worship the *devta*, because your father-in-law is sick."
>
> But our messenger returned and said, "Brother, your son-in-law is saying that even if his father-in-law dies, he will not come to his door!" Exactly one and a half months later my husband died, but even then my son-in-law did not come, and he himself died exactly one year later, on the day of my husband's death commemoration [*saraddh*]. This was a great tragedy for me: I was a widow here, and my daughter was also a widow there! Suffering welled up in my life, and then my younger daughter's husband also became sick. After that came my husband's *saraddh*, and then that of my son-in-law.

In an earlier chapter we saw that one of the first questions an oracle asks is, "Can the family unite?" In other words, can the family cooperate to perform a ritual? If they can, then perhaps they will be able to solve their problems. In many cases, family quarrels are the primary cause of illness and distress, so that collective performance of a ritual, with the cooperation it entails, can lead to healing. But often the client tells the oracle that the family cannot unite, and when that happens, then this very inability to unite tells the oracle that the source of the problem is likely to be a family quarrel. Sometimes such quarrels are irresolvable: they go on and on, ending in tragedy for all concerned, as exemplified by the next two case studies.

Rape, Insanity, and Suicide

Once I visited the guru Surendra in his home in Gair Sain, and found him in trance, with two clients listening to him attentively. I was struck by the violence

of his possession: in the middle of the consultation he suddenly fell unconscious to the floor, bashing his head against a table as he did so, and then lay there for some time, rigid and apparently in distress. Later I learned that his unusually dramatic and violent possession had to do with the tragic history of the clients he was advising at the time. Here is their story, as he told it to me some months later.

> Mr. Rakesh Lal is currently employed as a policeman in Kalimath. He is around forty years old, and was married ten years ago. About a year after his wedding he enlisted in the police, and the whole family was happy. In the course of his work he lived in many places in U.P. [the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh], while his wife stayed at home. But when he came home on leave after two years, she was four months pregnant. This caused much strife between them, and he began to hate her. He took the advice of the villagers and took her to court, and because she was pregnant, he obtained a divorce. They had been married only three years.
>
> Then he married a second time, and the first wife returned to her natal village. But on his wedding night he quarreled with his new wife, and even tried to strangle her! She fled outdoors, and the neighbors protected her. After one week had passed, he became mentally disturbed. Sometimes he tried to leap into the river to kill himself, sometimes he ate poison, and in this way a chasm opened in their marital life.
>
> She was from a good family, and her natal relatives supported and helped her, but his job didn't go well. Several times he had to become someone's servant, at other times things would be going well, but as soon as he met his wife, trouble would begin again in the household. He began sending his salary to her, because otherwise he would waste it all. Things continued like this for years, but the doctors told him that there was no mental fault. They kept on worshipping the gods and goddesses of many different places, but it didn't help.
>
> They had two daughters and a son, but their marriage continued to be unhappy. They consulted oracles at many places, and sometimes it emerged that a devil was afflicting them, sometimes a ghost emerged, sometimes an astrological fault emerged, and sometimes the oracle just said that someone was "playing" with them. It got so bad that while he was working, he would remain completely devoted to her, waiting for his holiday, but as soon as he returned home, their

problems would begin again. Finally his wife couldn't put up with him any more, and the beating began. They lived together in the Police Lines, and he even beat her there in the public square! One day he tried to hang himself by his scarf, but his fellow policemen rescued him. Finally the wife came to me with their troubles. I was possessed by Samin and holding a consultation in my home, and she put her rice on the god's seat. Quite a few people were waiting, and when her number came, she got the following diagnosis:

"Whatever this is, it is not *kabar*, nor a *chal* or a *chidra*, not a ghost, nor the affliction of a devil. It is the curse of a dejected woman who was thrown out, and she has placed a curse with the Kachiya of Kaldu. Although the accusation made against her was true, she was not able to speak about it, because it happened within her own family."

The court had granted Rakesh a divorce, but his first wife had actually been raped by one of his male relatives, and she was thrown out instead of giving an appropriate punishment to the man who victimized her! And that is why she placed a curse with the Kachiya of Kaldu. Exactly one month later, the man who did this evil thing to her died, and then her husband went mad. In this way, the chain [of events] went on for some time: he got married again, had two daughters and one young son, but the son and the father never got along. He beat his son, viciously! There was chaos in the neighborhood, and the marks are still on his body.

Their daughter was named Lakshmi. She was married at the age of eighteen, and exactly three months later, some accusations were made against her as well, and she began to have difficulties in her marital life, although no one could tell it from outside, and even her mother and father did not know that her troubles were that serious. One day she was found hanging from the light fixture in her room, even though half an hour earlier she had been sitting with her mother having a pleasant conversation. Rakesh Lal had gone to work, and by the time he returned to his room at 8:50 in the evening, his family had already seen this scene, that the girl had killed herself. This is all true.[3] In this way, Rakesh Lal's entire family has been destroyed, and whenever he consulted an oracle somewhere, the *hamkar* of this homeless woman emerged, the woman who ruined everything.

This situation continued for quite some time, and then they consulted me, and I advised them that until they met that woman who

> was thrown out, and asked her forgiveness, and satisfied her soul, there was no way this situation could be improved, because the four-month-old son in her stomach who was the cause of the accusation is now twenty-one years old and living in her natal village. Obviously he should receive all of his domestic rights, but the problem is that Rakesh Lal's relatives refuse to do this. I have managed to placate the god she summoned with her curse, but this will only last a short while. Rakesh Lal's family must take a decision. By the grace of god, they are not experiencing the difficulties they had previously. His wife and children are fine. They are all happy—the only sadness is that the mother still grieves over the girl who killed herself. But in the future they will have to worship that *hamkar*.

It is said that the *hamkar* of the living is most dangerous of all, the most difficult to control. And in this case not only was the source of the *hamkar* still alive, but she had also suffered a terrible injustice, which perhaps explains why the suffering of Rakesh Lal's family was so extreme. It is important that even in this most tragic of cases, the guru concludes his narrative by asserting that in the end, the estranged parties must reconcile and worship the god together. Once again, the discourse of cursing and the practices surrounding it encourage those involved to reestablish proper, moral relations among themselves, through collective worship by the victims together with those who cursed them.

The Curse of Jealousy

On the morning after his own *than ki puja* was finished (see Chapter 3, "Establishing a Shrine"), Darpal gave Guru Sonia his share (the head and right foreleg) of each sacrificed goat, paid him his fees, and bid him farewell. The puja had gone well, the weather was fine, and we were all in a good mood, sitting in the sunny courtyard, eating the plentiful meat of the sacrifice, and drinking liberal amounts of the country liquor that had been ordered for the occasion. Suddenly a man came and began begging Darpal to come to Shimli right away. The man was obviously in great distress, and said that once Darpal saw his family's difficulties, he would understand how important it was. He said that his son was terribly ill, the victim of a curse, and Darpal promised him that once he came, he would not abandon the child. The client gave him a one-hundred rupee note for his travel expenses, and while putting the money in his pocket, Darpal looked at me and said, "For us, this is jail—now I have to go!"

The next day I accompanied Darpal to the address that the man had given us. A strikingly attractive woman about forty years of age was waiting for us, and for the first few minutes, she and Darpal asked about each other's birthplace and families, establishing their kin relationship so that they would know how to relate to each other properly. The woman was at her wits' end due to the illness of her son. He was also there, a boy perhaps fourteen years old, along with a sister of about eighteen, and a younger male relative about ten years old. To my non-expert eyes, it looked as though the boy had some kind of neurological problem. His movements were uncontrolled, he could barely walk, go to the toilet, or dress himself without help, and he could not speak clearly. Periodically he would have a kind of seizure, in which all his muscles became tight and his entire body rigid, and during these seizures he seemed to be in great pain. Over and over, the boy's mother said that he had "become Chaurangya" (another name for Kachiya), and indeed he did look eerily like Kachiya, with his hands painfully twisted whenever he had a seizure. Otherwise he would sit and rock back and forth with his eyes closed. He was fascinated by the pen in my pocket and kept trying to grab it, but had insufficient muscular coordination to do so. His mother said that she had worked in a great many places, but was regularly fired because she had to take so much time off in order to look after him, and therefore she was suffering from economic problems as well as the daily stress of caring for her son.

She had performed a series of rituals, she said, and often after doing so, her son would be fine for one or even two years, but then his illness would return. She talked about her problems for several hours with barely a pause, and constantly repeated the same theme: the healing rituals would be successful for a time, but her son would again become ill, and subsequent rituals would not work at all. Sometimes she blamed this on the gurus she had employed, claiming that the earlier ones were good but the later ones were not. She had spent thousands of rupees on rituals, she said, especially at Kaldu.

I asked her which doctors she had consulted, and she said that she went to Delhi in 1997, where they checked for a tumor and did a scan, but found nothing. "We wasted forty to fifty thousand rupees there," she says. They returned home and did another puja, she said, and the boy was fine for six months or so. He spoke, and regularly attended the fourth grade. At another time they did a puja and he was fine for four years, but now his condition was so bad that even puja didn't help. She said that they had taken him to a well-known hospital in Candigarh, the capital of Punjab, and to a psychiatrist in Rishikesh, but nothing had worked. They tried everything, and finally, she said (contradicting herself) they decided that the only way to relieve the boy's suffering was through puja.

The boy ate his own feces, he had to be fed by hand, he had "lost his memory" so that he didn't even recognize her anymore, she had no peace, she

couldn't sleep, and when she tried to do so, he would call out "They're coming, mom!" and she could see ghostly hands coming through the windows to seize him. Once, she said, they had a particularly bad two days: the boy was absolutely wild, and when she insisted, the doctor give him a sedative—then her daughter got possessed! It was, however, the first and only time that this happened to the girl.

The problem began immediately after she married and went to her husband's home, and requested his elder brother (her *jeth*) and his wife (her *jethani*) to clear out a room in which they could live. Based on what I subsequently learned, I suspect that this "request" probably involved a major quarrel, although she said nothing about this. Shortly afterward the boy became ill, and the client accused her *jethani* of harboring *hamkar* towards her and her son, of "putting the *devta* on him." Later I realized that her husband, the sick boy's father who had come the day before to summon Darpal, was having an affair with his elder brother's wife, the client's *jethani*, whom she had accused of "putting the *devta* on the child"—so that the sexual rivalry between these two women was a central factor in the whole situation. But of course this was something that she never explicitly mentioned. Later, when the extremity of the boy's illness became apparent, she said that she had begged her *jethani* to release the boy. "I'll give you back the room," she said, "but please, for God's sake, release my son from his torment!"

I was shocked by the extremity of the boy's condition, and moved by the woman's story. She gave me permission to record her conversation with Darpal, and then she spoke—and often wept—for more than two hours. Were these merely the ramblings of a distraught woman? Perhaps. But taken as a whole, her narrative represented a complex and consistent story of betrayal, cursing, and affliction. Whether or not what she said was true, it certainly reflects local ideas about ritual aggression, and about the terrible consequences of cursing within the family. As I took my tape recorder from my rucksack she was weeping bitterly.

> CLIENT: I was a good girl from a good family, a well-educated girl! I don't deserve this! I could have built a house with all the money I've spent on doctors and gurus. My fate has been ruined, I have to sit up all night, I wander around and can't even work properly. I have to come home every hour on the hour. My family shows no pity; they accuse my husband of being a *ghar javaim*;[4] I wish I would die! She has fed *kapat*[5] to all of us, and we have removed it. We went from here to Pauri to consult an oracle, to Loli village. There is a young girl there on whom the goddess Dhari comes. Major Sahab phoned me and said that if I wanted to consult

an oracle about my son, I should go there. So I went to Loli to consult the oracle. We went from Pauri to Papu and from there to Loli. The goddess possesses such a small girl! And she said, "The god has come on you." She said, "Someone has fed you *kapat*. They have fed you the ash of a dead person in your food, or in a mango." The *jethani* had done all this work, even though no one would believe that she would do it, since she is so sophisticated [*sharif*]. We didn't believe it either, when we were happy, but now that we are suffering, we believe it! We went to Saharanpur to remove the *kapat* just the other day, and came back only recently.

DARPAL: What came out in the *kapat* in Saharanpur?

CLIENT: A small piece of bone. When we saw it, we were so shocked and disgusted! The girl's hair was flying [*bikirtti*], and mine too! Then my husband came, and they gave us *pithaim* and water. They didn't give us anything to eat, just a glass of water. And the oracle told us just to gargle with it, not to drink it. He told us to take the glass of water from the canister with our own hands. He had a plate of sugar on the table, and he kept on reciting mantras into it, over and over, and told us to gargle with it. And before we knew it, a whole mess of *kabar* came out! All we had to do was gargle, he didn't even mix the sugar with the water. But it cost us Rs. 1000 to take out the *kabar*. He told us to do *puch* once more, and then return. So I went to do *puch*, and it emerged that there was still some *kabar* there, and that we would have to go three or four times more to get it all out. He told us so much, and we spent so much money, and she [the *jethani*] said to me "Here is my *maiti devta*,[6] and you're telling us to empty your room?" What can I do, when she says, "This is the kind of *devta* that always follows behind his *dhyani*s"?

As already mentioned, the root problem was most likely the sexual rivalry between the sick boy's mother and her *jethani* (husband's elder brother's wife), with whom her husband was having an affair. After the client married him, she moved to his home and demanded a separate room for them to live in. This seems to have resulted in a fight between her and the *jethani*, who was also living there at the time. When her son became sick, she accused her rival of cursing him, and the *jethani* responded with a covert threat: Kachiya always takes care of his *dhyani*s. Since the *jethani* came from Kaleshwar, she was Kachiya's *dhyani*, and he would automatically be on her side.

CLIENT: Oh well, whatever mistakes were made, were made. She got *hamkar*, and maybe I made a mistake, too, by demanding a room inside. "So we've both made a mistake, *thakurani*[7]—you can keep the room.

Just keep your mind pure! If my son gets well, I want nothing else: I will spend the rest of my days in a cave somewhere." And what did she say? "Shall I go to the god right now? Shall I go right now? Shall I eat your share?" Then I asked, "Why do you do this?" And she replied, "Well, when you cleared out the room, I did have some *hamkar*. And this god is a very dangerous god!" When she herself says such things, then of course I believe that it's her![8] And I thought, "If she really did get *hamkar*, well, the *dhyani* is the beloved of the god, and he must have come [and afflicted my son]." I said, "You may have made a mistake, but look, this is your child as well as mine. What injustice have I done to you that you should pick such a fight with me? The god will provide justice! Where did you make that *kabar* that you fed us? When I went to the oracle, he even told me that person's name! I will catch that person you told to make the *kapat*!"

At this point, Darpal asked who had made the *kabar*, and the client told his name, his father's name, his village, and so forth.

CLIENT: Was this something good that she did, feeding it to her own roots [i.e., her family]? The god even told me the name and address [of the person who made the *kabar*]. He said that my *jethani* had X [a Harijan name] make it. They got together and made an Ambedkar House on our part of the land.

Here a second cause of the quarrel emerges: a dispute over land. Later in the interview, the client tells me that she and her husband are fighting with his family, which is trying to take their land by giving bribes to government officials and so forth. "We want to build a house—then we will have a place to do puja and to build a *than*. But we are fighting with them over the land," she says. The details of this alleged attempt to take their land had to do with a government-sponsored initiative for the uplift of the lowest castes, named for Bhimrao Ambedkar, the Harijan leader and chief architect of the Indian constitution.

CLIENT: But I said, "We are not going to give up our land! Destroy the temple! I have a map!" But he [her adversary] said, "I'm a big leader here!" and so I took the map to the District Magistrate and showed it to him. I haven't gone home in twelve years—the entire period that the deity has bothered us—but still I'm not going to give up our land! I've kept a dead man's leg in that house, and I won't remove it until I return there. I put it there on the day my son was born. The oracle told me to remove

it, but I replied that I don't have to do so; I will remove it only when I go back there.

After a short break to change cassettes, my recording resumes:

CLIENT: X and Y [two Harijan priests of Kachiya of Kaldu] made our *dikara* incorrectly [*ulta*].[9] Today Y is very arrogant about the god being his, but that's all right—the god will provide justice! His wife really scolded them, telling him they had done a great injustice to our son, and that they would be ruined as a result. [She said,] "Your children will end up the same way. How many times has the boy come here to do puja? How many goats has he brought? How could you do this to him?" Their faces really dropped when she scolded them like this. Y is worshiping the god [for me] in Shimli, but when he returns to Kaleshwar, then Bhairav appears in my *jethani*'s dream, and tells her that they worshiped the god in Shimli, and she comes to Kaleshwar the next day with a cock, and Y turns the god into a ghost and sends him back to us in Shimli!

The client is accusing Kachiya's priests of duplicity. She hired them to do a ritual for her in Shimli, but the next day, when her rival appeared in Kaldu to do a counter-ritual, the same priests sent the god back to the client. Later she says that they did this because of their kinship relations with her rival: when Y first agreed to do the client's puja, he did not know that her rival the *jethani* was actually his own sister's daughter, and that he therefore had a kinship obligation to take her part. Although the client consistently refers to Y as her mother's brother (*mama*), this is actually a "fictive" kin relation, whereas he is the true (*khas*) mother's brother of the client's rival, the *jethani*.

CLIENT: So is this a good thing to do? To betray me like this? Does a mother's brother do that? He is my mother's brother as much as he is hers! If my son dies, then Y's sin [*askar*] will fall on him

DARPAL: Whatever else may be true, the boy is everyone's son.

CLIENT: When Bhairav dances, then I say, "If I am dishonest, then eat me! Eat my children! Eat my husband! If I've done any injustice, if I've fought with her, or have taken something from her, then eat me!" I only said that they should empty one room for me—OK, maybe that was my mistake, but I swear [*samkalp karna*] that I would give up everything, all of my husband's rights in that house, if only my son would be cured! I said, "If you are my god, then eat it all! Right now!" Then he [that is, Bhairav speaking through the oracle Y] gave up his injustice and became just; he appeared and said, "What work is there for Kachiya to do now?"

Darpal: Who did Bhairav come over?

Client: Over Y.

Darpal: And Kachiya?

Client: Over an old woman. I recognize her, but don't know her name. Kachiya came to me and said, "Look, I only come when there is injustice, never when there is justice [*anyaya pe calta hum, nyaya pe nahim calta hum*]. Because she [the *jethani*] is my *dhyani*, she comes to me and weeps. That is why I go with her." It was the Kachiya of Kaldu, not of Dol.[10] He used to come on my *jethani*'s mother. He came with her as dowry.[11] He used to dance in Sonali, my *jethani*'s mother's natal village. After she died, Kachiya began to come over her husband's closest kin.[12] When he danced there, I said "Eat us, eat us! You've tortured us for twelve or thirteen years, you might as well devour all of us now!"

Darpal: If your husband had told us all of this [when he came to summon me yesterday], then we would have brought X with us today. And we would have made everything work; we would have made it fit, and then left.

Client: Look, Y also has children, he also has a family. Is this a good thing?

Darpal: There is also competition in their family.

Client: Yes.

Darpal: X and Y and the others, they're all fighting.

Client: I've brought so many goats there, big goats! But Y has done this bad thing, and here is my child with his broken arms and legs, he can't even move! They should have a bit of compassion—they also have families! If Y had scolded them the way that his own wife scolded him, then there wouldn't be such a problem. She really scolded him, asking him what the child had done to him that he should act in this way. She told him that we had only one son, and that if he died then we would die too [i.e., our lineage would be finished], and she was right—she said it all right in front of me! When she took my part that day, I was happy that we were on the same side, but Y was speechless. She said that as soon as my *jethani* showed up with the cock, Y was ready to do puja. But I cried and wept in front of them, and said, "You've done very well, you and your sister's daughter, sending the god back to us! Just eat us all now, and then you'll be at peace!" Then Y said, "She has a *hamkar*. If she were not my sister's daughter, then I would turn her around [*ghuma dena*], right then

and there! But she is my sister's daughter; what can I do? You should get a guru who is bigger than me, someone who can take care of the problem." When I first went there to do *hamkar puja*, I didn't know that Y was my *jethani*'s true mother's brother. He said, "I am Jamnu Baba," and when he came to give me *pithaim* it really affected me, like a blow, and I went there again the next day to do puja. I went straight to him, because I didn't know that my *jethani* was in cahoots with him. In my heart, I thought, "What's happening? I don't have enmity with anyone, there is no *ahamkar*, what's the problem?" He [was possessed by Bhairav, and] said, "My *dhyani* has done this. Where are you from?" I said, "Shrinagar," and he asked which family in Shrinagar, and I said who my husband's father was, and then he grew fierce, and said, "What relation is she to you?" and I said "She is my true *jethani*," and he said, "True *jethani*?" and I said "yes," and he threw down the *thali*! And then he said this and that, and demanded all those goats. I took fifty goats: to Kaldu, to Shrinagar, to her *mait*—and still I got no peace. Y took the Baihiyals, along with firetongs and the *phavara* and I don't know what else—he took them all to Shrinagar, and for four years my son was fine. But after four years his affliction returned! At that time he studied in fourth grade. But then he became ill again, and even though we did puja, he just remained ill. It's so difficult! If it were a sickness, it would stop! We suffer so much, but Y has no compassion. And Jassu also did puja, but it didn't work at all.

The client complains that Jassu, the "traditional" guru of Kaldu, did puja at the wrong *than*; at the *than* of the Kachiya of Dol rather than at Kaldu. The young male relative staying there complains that the sick boy's father hasn't even come to Shimli this evening, that the people at Shrinagar won't let him leave.

CLIENT: Why did he stay there when he knew we had called the guru? When there's this urgent work at home? Did he have any business there, when he already knew I had called the guru? What a low person he is! Who knows how much *kabar* they fed him there? They've fed him so much *kabar* there, who knows how much? They've fed him so much *kabar*, who knows what his problem is? [The client repeats this over and over, and later while translating the recording, Sacchu says that she has gone mad, because she knows that her husband is having an affair with the *jethani*, and that is why he stayed with her in Shrinagar.]

The young male relative says that they should go to Shrinagar and drag the sick boy's father to Shimli, and the client suggests that they phone him. Then

the relative says that the reason the father is not coming is that his sister and her husband have gone to Shrinagar to visit. At this point Darpal, no doubt reacting to some earlier hint that I failed to notice, begins asking about her kinship relations again, and eventually realizes that the sister and her husband are well-known to him—in fact he even knows that they have done another ritual elsewhere today. But he says that it must be over by now, and if they want peace they should fetch both the client's husband and his sister's husband. The client complains about her husband going again and again to the house that is destroying them. I am confused, and ask Darpal for clarification, and he says, "If we are doing *hamkar puja* here, if we are taking care of the god, but her husband keeps on going there, then how will they get relief?" He says that because the *hamkar* is that of a living person (the *jethani*), the ritual has to be done at a crossroads, where everyone's feet will trample it. The client responds that everyone—gurus, oracles, everyone—is telling her that the *jethani* is such a powerful woman that her *hamkar* won't be destroyed even by one hundred goats; that only with her death will there be peace. She says that the *jethani* is a witch (*dain-varg*) who stays active twenty-four hours a day. Darpal advises them not to do an elaborate ritual, because this would require a *samkalpa* vow that cannot be performed in the absence of the boy's father. Darpal will just do a simple puja and go home.

He lays two red cloths on the table and puts a handful of rice and black lentils on each of them. He puts cow-dung ash, white rice, and red *pithaim* in a *thali* and mixes the ash and the *pithaim* together while reciting a mantra. Then he divides this mixture in half, wraps each half in a piece of paper, and places one packet on each of the rice and dal mixtures lying on the red cloths. He ties one bundle shut, and touches it several times to the sick boy's forehead and chest. Then he adds a coin to the second bundle and does the same with it. After inquiring about whether the walls are made of cement or not, and considering where the bundle should best be placed, Darpal circles the first bundle over the heads of those present, and places it inside the room, in the god's small *than*. At the same time he recites a mantra to Bhairav, to "summon" him so that he will protect the family. He places the second bundle with the coin in it outside, while reciting an *ukhel* mantra to "awaken" the afflicting god Kachiya and open his path, so that he will return to whoever sent him. Finally we lay down to sleep, but I am unable to do so because the boy has painful seizures all night long. His mother keeps saying that the boy has become "the enemy of the family." Next morning his condition is unchanged, and Darpal says he can't understand why the puja didn't work. He says that the god has obviously gone to sleep.

This example shows how the client uses ideas about cursing to construct a very coherent narrative that explains her son's illness by linking it to a land dispute, as well as to her rivalry with her husband's elder brother's wife. It also illustrates a number of factors that are typical of cursing in Chamoli. First of all, the two root causes of the curse, quarrels over sexual relations and over land, are some of the most common reasons for cursing, as we already saw in the case studies "Rape, Insanity, and Suicide" in this chapter, and "The Man Whose Land Was Eaten" in chapter 5. The fundamental immorality of cursing within the family is also of central importance. The *jethani* keeps secret the fact that she has laid a curse, because this would severely damage her reputation. In this she is successful: people find it hard to believe that she would do such a thing, because she appears to be so sophisticated (*sharif*). But the client deduces the fact that she has done so from the *jethani's* earlier threats, as well as from the statements of the oracle Y. One of the most interesting moments of the client's narrative is when she tells how the oracle Y became furious once he realized that he was being employed by his true sister's daughter's rival, and "threw down the *thali*!" This is another example of the "instrumentalization" discussed in the previous chapter. According to the local ideology of possession, Y was possessed by Bhairav at the time and speaking with the god's voice, and therefore should not have felt any particular obligation to Y's true sister's daughter. But clearly he did, and this passes without comment from the client, for whom such "strategic misrecognition" is not particularly unusual. Overall, the narrative shows that the intricate net of kinship relations is of central importance for cursing. In this case, kinship factors work to the double disadvantage of the client. Her rival the *jethani* is in a more advantageous position, not only because she is the *dhyani* of Kachiya, but also because she is the true sister's daughter of Bhairav's priest and oracle, Y. According to local ideas, when someone utters a curse within the family it eventually rebounds on them, and so one would expect this narrative to include the suffering of the *jethani*, but this is not mentioned. Is it because she is such a powerful woman, or is it because the client herself uttered the first curse, when she demanded that a room be vacated for her and her husband?

And so we return to a fundamental theme of this book: the great value placed on family unity. Because of the centrality of this value, there is a strong moral injunction against cursing within the family. No matter how badly one is treated, no matter how much injustice one suffers, one should never utter a curse against a family member. One may not summon a god or spirit and ask him to attack a family member. Such an act is morally reprehensible. And yet it is precisely here that the strongest form of ambivalence is encountered,

because the family is a major site—perhaps *the* major site—of injustice, exploitation, jealousy, and anger. Anger over the distribution of land, envy of a sibling's children (especially sons), jealousy over someone's success—such sentiments are common within the family, and they often result in perceived injustice. This leads to a classic double bind. On the one hand, the whole conceptual edifice of the cult says that the god provides justice to the weak—and this is said over and over, in myth, song, iconography, and personal anecdote. On the other hand, if one feels exploited or abused by a more powerful family member, one cannot approach the god for justice. Of course people do pronounce curses anyway, in acts of irrational passion, or even sometimes of calculated aggression.

A Family in Turmoil

Once the circle of cursing and counter-cursing begins, it is very difficult to control, as is illustrated by a related by Surendra from Gair Sain:

> A joint family of three brothers lived together in village K. Their parents were deceased. The eldest and the youngest brother had a quarrel over land, and the eldest brother took the youngest brother's portion and harassed his children day and night. When they couldn't stand it any more, the younger brother's wife laid a curse [*ghat dal di*] at the *than* of Kaldu Kachiya in her *mait*, [saying], "We are leaving our land and our estate, but if you are truly the protector of your sister and her sons, if you are the beloved of the *dhyani*, then you judge our case!" They left everything behind and went to live in Muradabad [a city in the plains].
>
> So now they were living separately, and because of the curse, the older brother's family began to have troubles. But after a year, the younger brother thought, "He's my brother, after all," and they came back home. Their relationship with one another improved, and they forgot the curse. Then the younger brother was transferred to another city in Uttar Pradesh, where his wife got sick. She went to milk the buffalo one morning, and suddenly a dog came and bit her, and she died, right there in the city where they were living. And her eldest daughter died, too. But they still had three surviving sons. Then the father had big problems. He got sick with "brain tuberculosis," and was sent to the Medical College in Agra. He said [to the god], "If you spare my life, I will do the eight-animal sacrifice for you."[13] He was

cured and returned home. I myself did the sacrifice, but about ten days later, he died.

Now the youngest of the three brothers was dead, along with his wife and their eldest daughter. Who was left? The oldest brother's three daughters and two sons, and the youngest brother's three sons. One of them went crazy, and there were more problems: the animals stopped giving milk, and so forth. They went to consult an oracle, and it emerged that the problems were due to their mother's *hamkar*. She had died, but her curse had not been revoked. So they worshiped her *hamkar* with milk,[14] but the problems didn't cease. At the time of this *hamkar puja*, the three sons called their father's elder brother's wife and she also participated, believing it was simply the *puja* of the three brothers' mother's *hamkar*. She gave them back their land, and was thereby free of the god. But the three brothers took an unfairly large portion of her land, and moreover they did a secret puja, a crooked [*ulta*] puja. They bound her god, and they bound/stopped the curse [that their mother had made before she died]. They tried to eliminate the effects of the curse that their mother had placed, but had been followed by reconciliation.

The eldest brother drove away the youngest brother, and stole his land, and so the youngest brother's wife cursed the oldest brother and his family, but now both she and her husband were dead. Her surviving sons reconciled with the older brother's family; however, they neither consulted the god nor performed a collective puja to eliminate the curse that their mother had laid. They had worshiped her *hamkar*, but they had not eliminated her curse [*ghat*] with a joint puja; instead they had done a crooked puja to bind the god. And so now the curse was still active, and the god was afflicting both sides.Things got even worse, for both families. They came to me, but didn't tell me the whole history of their problems. I went to the god's *than*, and asked him to tell me the whole story, so that I could perform their puja. He told me to do his *ukhel* first, that is, to release him. So I did it, and the god danced. During this ritual, both sides have ropes around their necks, like cows [see chapter 3, "*Kas puja*"]. They all admitted their mistakes, and the god forgave them. The younger brother's family received his portion of the land back, because the elder brother's wife was an honest and trustworthy person. The whole village came and participated in this collective puja. But the three sons of the youngest brother continued to fight. Why?

The middle brother had made a love marriage. He had three sons, but all of them died, one after another. The first died after five months, the second was stillborn, and the third died during delivery. The doctor said that the woman's uterus was no good. On the day of the puja, he made an individual vow [*mannat*] that he would worship Kachiya if he obtained a living son. At that time, his wife was two months' pregnant. He went to Pauri to work, but once again the child died in the womb. He returned with his wife, the family gathered, and they called me to do the *jagar*.[15] They had planned to consult an oracle, to find out why all the children were dying. Kachiya danced again, [possessing the eldest son] in the presence of many villagers and said, "You really think highly of yourselves; you are very arrogant!" The middle brother began to argue, "What did I do? I only made my request to you! What kind of Kachiya are you? Did you come to protect your *dhyan*, or to eat us?" One of the villagers said, "This is all the play of fate, because he is arguing with the god. The god doesn't "eat" anyone!" The argument between god and devotee quickly became an argument between the two brothers, although the onlookers understood it to be an argument between god and human. But I understood what was happening.

The middle brother struck the puja *thali* and said, "If you want to eat us, then eat us! You give false justice!" He struck the *thali* so hard that he bent it, and tossed it into the field, and rolled up his sleeves, ready for a fight! The whole family was screaming and yelling at each other, and the onlookers fled. Only I remained there, along with two or three elders. I swear, if there had been weapons then someone would have been killed! The elder brother's trance ended, and he took out five rupees and put it in a new *thali*, and took an oath: "God, do not dance in my body after today, because you are being insulted. And if you dance, then I will offer my three children as sacrifices at your shrine!" The assembly was finished, and the elder brother went home. The younger brother was ashamed, but nevertheless he asked the elder brother to do his puja. But the elder brother refused. All three brothers' families are now having great problems. They are really troubled. Why? Because although the old woman distributed the land fairly, the three sons of her deceased husband's youngest brother had secretly taken an unfair portion of her land, and had crookedly bound the *devta*. The old woman's family is OK, but the three brothers are still afflicted. They refuse to admit their mistake, and moreover two of them are fighting with each other. They won't

get relief until they admit their mistakes and return the old woman's land.

In the final part of this story, the middle brother accuses his elder brother of a kind of "instrumentalization," alleging that his trance is not authentic and that he is merely using it to pursue his quarrel with the middle brother. But from the perspective of the guru Surendra who told the story, this was not the case. On the contrary, the middle brother was wrong to make such an accusation. What is of perhaps greater interest is how this story illustrates that the ritual format must be properly followed. Even though the youngest brother might be thought to have acted properly by forgetting the quarrel and moving back into the family home, he did so without publicly acknowledging his wife's curse, without jointly worshiping and eliminating it with his brothers, and therefore he and his family were terribly afflicted. This is reminiscent of the case study "A Forgotten Shrine," in chapter 5.

As we have already seen, such cursing normally involves calling on the god and sending him to attack one's enemy. And when a victim has been attacked in this way, he responds by "sending the god back." Once this cycle of sending the god and sending the god back has begun, then everyone's morality comes into question. This is shown by the language, the rituals, and the self-understanding of those involved in sending the god back. To what, exactly, does this phrase refer? Literally, it means that someone has laid a curse against you, they have sent the god to attack you or afflict you, and so you hire a guru to send the god back, that is, to reverse the curse. But of course, relatives should not be sending the god to attack each other in the first place, nor should they be sending the god back. Rather, they should unite and worship the god together. This is the double bind: one may not curse within the family, yet one must defend oneself. This was illustrated clearly in "A Pension for the God," in chapter 5, where the client wavered ambivalently between his desire to protect himself by sending the god back, and his equally strong desire to reconcile with his family members. Even when one initiates ritual aggression against someone outside the family, it is normally represented as *defense* rather than *attack*—that is, as "sending the god back" rather than more simply (and accurately) as "sending the god."

In the very same oracular session there was another client waiting his turn, whose consultation illustrated these points very well. The transcript of his consultation suggests that because of a land dispute he had sent the god to afflict his own brother, a fact that he was at first unwilling to admit, and which emerged only in the course of the session. He was consulting the oracle to find out why his own ritual aggression had not been successful. In fact, he himself

had been afflicted, and his brother had not yet returned the disputed land. The oracle urged him to worship together with his family, until finally he admitted that they couldn't unite, because they were fighting among themselves, and it was in fact *him* who had cursed his brother! This angered the oracle, who scolded him for cursing within the family, but nevertheless continued to advise him according to his wishes.

ORACLE: There are problems in the family:
Problems between an elder line and a younger line.
There is quarrelling, there is dissatisfaction.
You have moved from an old house to a new one,
But still you have no peace.
The same old problems return.
[tosses rice, looks at the grains lying on her hand]
Here is *hamkar*, and someone has also called on Bhairav.
The *hamkar* is that of a female.
A male summoned Bhairav.

CLIENT'S WIFE: Which female?

ORACLE (looking at grains): Oldest lineage, two women,
One alive, one dead.
The dead one has *hamkar*.
Now there's trouble in the whole family,
From the dead to the living.
Now you'll have to do puja of both.
You'll have to worship the *hamkar*,
And you'll have to worship the god who was summoned.
Can you join together to do puja?

CLIENT: Yes—but why has the god afflicted us?

ORACLE: I already told you:
From animals to people, everyone is affected.

CLIENT: But my relationship is different.[16]

ORACLE: That may be so, but when you summon the god, it has effects for nine generations.

CLIENT: The one who cursed still lives; why are we suffering?

. . .

ORACLE: Are you united?
Look, from your name to your wealth,
From your tongue to your mouth,

From your land to your fields,
Animals, land, women, men—
All are affected!
Are you united?
What do you want?
[tosses rice]

ORACLE: The elder one who did the *hamkar* is dead,
But the young one is alive,
And those with envy are alive,
And the one who summoned the god is also alive.
'God on the lips, but a knife on the hips'—
On the outside all is well,
But inside is jealousy.
So you must take cow dung in your hands,
Bind a rope and go to the shrine.
Do the *hamkar puja* secretly.
Do the *kas* and the *than puja*s jointly.
It is only a [human] soul that is bothering you, not the god.

CLIENT: But why didn't they give us the field?

ORACLE: I've already told you that, Wayfarer.
From your land to your fields, from your women to your men . . .
I've already told you it's a fight over land.
There's a fight over an old house.
The others built a house and took three hands' land,
And five hands' land is a cowshed,
And one field has caused this envy.
Who knows? God knows.
I am just a path-teller, so let me tell the path.
Your problems will be settled in the village council.
They didn't give up the field after the last puja, did they?
No—so they'll hardly give it up willingly.
But I'm going to tell you the way.
I won't graze in that field, the other god will.
I only tell the way.
There are three brothers in the family, and all are afflicted.
Are you ready to do *hamkar puja*, separately?
You shouldn't do it with the person who summoned the god.

CLIENT: Actually, *we* summoned the god! The one with the *hamkar* is dead.

ORACLE: Will you cooperate? No, of course not! Why should they cooperate when you're the ones who cursed them? Would *you* cooperate with someone who had cursed you?

[My assistant asks, "Who cursed whom?" The oracle is irritated by his question, and shouts out,]

He cursed them! They stole his field, and he cursed them, but they sent the god back, and he's been troubling them for one and a half years! How will you unite? [Will you say] "I cursed you, now worship with me"? The other side sent the god back, they did it very well!

CLIENT: We don't want to unite, either!

ORACLE: You're all equal before the god.
No rich or poor, no big or small.
You and your enemy are the same to me,
And to your god as well.
And now you are afflicted by your own *hamkar,*
And by your "summoning" [of the god], too:
Trouble for one and a half years.
Do you want to send the god back, or unite?

CLIENT: We want to send the god back. How can we unite, when they're eating our field?

ORACLE: The god says from your land to your fields . . .

Through the guru's hands you must offer these things [she recites extremely quickly]: One rooster seven grains flatbread driftwood sand from a ravine water from seven streams a hearth made from the mud of a place where cows have drunk sixty-four thorns pumpkin *ginjar*-root red powder yellow powder red cloth chicken. Understand?

Then the god will afflict them for a while, and they will give up the field and come to you for shelter. Bind up their *hamkar* in a swampy place, and summon your own *hamkar* and your god. You have to bind their *hamkar*, because they have committed a crime against the land—understand? Do it quickly: it takes one goat and one chicken. An animal sacrifice for Bhairav, and a chicken for the *hamkar*. The guru will take care of this himself. Hair and nail clippings in the seven grains: circle them over both people and livestock. Call upon the *hamkar*. Give five rupees and 25 *paise* to summon Bhairava.

CLIENT: Should we work together?

ORACLE (angrily): How can you cooperate? Why should they cooperate with you when you are the one who sent the god? The god belongs

> to all three households. You call him and he will settle the dispute himself.

Sending the God Back

The ritual of sending the god back is very difficult to observe because it is forbidden, and therefore performed in secret. But during the final days of my fieldwork, one of the gurus told me that he was going to "send the god back" that very evening, and he invited me to go along. We waited till after dark to leave his house, and didn't tell anyone where we were going. The ritual was held at a rather isolated hut belonging to a low-caste man. We reached there late at night, and were careful to keep very quiet, so that no one would hear us. After some time, the client came: a high-caste Rajput man accompanied by his low-caste friend. We waited several hours—in fact the guru and I slept—so that we didn't start until the proper time, well past midnight. The guru prepared the ritual materials inside the house, and performed a ritual to summon one of Kachiya's fiercest forms. After considerable ritual effort on the guru's part, the owner of the house was finally possessed. He promised to afflict the client's enemy on his behalf, and then we went outside into the dark, where we sacrificed a chicken and a goat. Accompanied by his low-caste friend, the client took the chicken's head, with a lit candle wick in its mouth, and left. He then completed the most hazardous task, travelling several miles through the dark night and crossing several dangerous cliffs, not stopping anywhere along the way, and finally leaving the chicken's head near his victim's house. Others at this ritual were impressed by the fact that the client and his low-caste friend were willing to do this, despite the risk of ghosts and other supernatural beings.

It is important to note how the guru justified his actions to me. He said that he rarely does such rituals, and that he did so in this case only because there had been an obvious injustice. Here is how he explained the background to this "forbidden" ritual and why he was willing to perform it.

> Fifty women had gone to cut grass. And my client, Rup Singh, was on the hillside above them with his flock of sheep and goats, along with two other shepherds. They accidentally loosened a rock, which fell down and struck one of these fifty women. It was clearly an accident—the women cutting grass could see that it was, and so could the other shepherds. Nevertheless, one of the women accused Rup Singh of throwing the rock on purpose. And so Rup Singh's enemy,

> Mangal Singh, had him arrested. Everyone knew that the charge was false—even Mangal Singh's own daughter said so!
>
> Soon after that, Rup Singh came here, to this very house, to the shrine of Kachiya, but he didn't do any rituals, he didn't call a priest, he didn't summon the god—nothing. He just took a fistful of earth with him from here, and ran back home. But of course nothing happened, because he hadn't done the proper rituals. So he came to me and asked for my help. He said, "My father never had to go to court, nor did my grandfather, nor even my great grandfather! But now Madan Singh has shamed me, he has cut off my nose[17] in public—why did he file a case against me? I am innocent! So I will summon the god, and *he* will judge my case!" And that is why Rup Singh sent the god back. [He said,] "If I struck her with that rock, then destroy me!" And when the god afflicts Madan Singh, then he will have to come here to worship him.

The guru speaks of sending the god back, but in truth no one is sending the god back—on the contrary, this is the first act of ritual aggression. It is a moral transgression that is, in Bourdieu's terms, *misrecognized*, and represented as an act of defense, as a justified response to Mangal Singh's aggression. Even the language confirms this: the guru speaks of "sending the god back" when, in fact, he is simply "sending the god."

The guru began the ritual by making a *yantra* of Bhairav on an *ikadya ront,* and then he put a second *ikadya ront* on top of it. This rather unusual procedure of making two breads rather than one was necessary because the second bread was taken away with the sacrificed chicken's head at the conclusion of the ritual, when the god was sent back. And the mantra drawn on the bread was also unusual: it was basically circular, with the outward-facing side "open" (without tridents) so that the god could travel unhindered in the direction of the enemy to attack him, while several tridents were ranged along other side facing the client, so that the god could not return and afflict him. The guru put the seven-grain mixture on top of both *ront,* and also placed four cigarettes there, along with a few sweets and a dough lamp containing four wicks. The oracle kept a separate *thali,* with rice and some money in it. The guru gave *pithaim* to all the participants, including the oracle and his family.

Next, the guru recited the water purification mantra, and spoke to the oracle (who was not yet possessed), saying, "Rup Singh heard your name and came here." He then recited the *ukhel* mantra, explicitly invoking Kachiya. All this time, the oracle sat passively. Then the guru spoke to him again: "If you are bound with nails, then tell us, and emerge! Otherwise you will not find any

path. You won't get any of the eighty-four seats, and you won't see the festival of the eighty-four siddhas. Go where you are sent, pacify my mind, and your own as well!"

After some minutes the oracle was possessed, and assumed the typical posture of Kachiya—back bent, hands bent like claws, his face a grimacing mask—and began calling out "Adesh!" to various gods and goddesses. This went on for some time, with the guru issuing threats of increasing severity to him, trying to increase the intensity of the trance and inspire the god to attack the enemy. Then the guru changed tack and, instead of threatening the god, he appealed to him in the terms of his kin relationship to the god's human oracle, fusing in his very speech the identities of the god and his oracle: "I am your *dhyan*! Don't think of me as a guru, think of me as your *dhyan*! Will you go? Will you go? Today you must go, and retain the honor of your *than*! We have come today because of the fame of your *than*. Will you go?"

Still the god does not descend, and the oracle's trance is very weak. The guru begins to recite his *ukhel* mantra, now with a very aggressive posture. He shakes his finger at the oracle and recites his mantras forcefully, practically shouting them out. But the god does not return, and so the guru instructs Rup Singh to take an incense stick in his hand and assume a posture of entreaty. The guru begins to recite the *utpatti* mantra of Kachiya, which decribes his form and appearance, and simultaneously orders him to seize the enemy. After some time, the oracle is possessed again, and speaking loudly and rapidly he says, "Look, Guru, look! I've already gone there! I've gone there!" "What did you do there?" asks the guru, and the oracle replies, "I've gone there! I've gone! So why have you come again to my *than*?" Then the guru tells him that they want to sacrifice a cock and take it there; that is, they want to attack Mangal Singh. He removes his cap and puts it at god's feet, saying, "Here is the honor [*izzat*] of your guru." This is a highly significant gesture: the cap is from the highest and most respected part of the body, the head, and to lay it at another's feet is, in effect, to place one's honor in his hands. In other words, the guru is saying to Kachiya that if he does not go where he is directed, his guru's honor will be forfeited.

> GURU: Go there and bring him to my *than*! See to him! And I will worship you as long as I live, and so will my descendants! Give your rice grains [i.e., your promise], and go! You have to go! You have to go!
>
> ORACLE: I will definitely go! But first I will give you a promise.

The guru joins his hands in front of the oracle, smiling, obviously very pleased. He keeps addressing the oracle as "Parameshvari" and "Khabardar." The oracle tosses rice into the air several times, until only a single grain

remains in his hand, and the guru asks him, "Is it your only path [i.e., is it the one path you have to follow]? Rup Singh has your *than* in his own house, too. He has come here to grasp the root [the original shrine]." The oracle responds by crying out "Adesh!" several times, after which he asks for some *vibhuti* (empowered ash). Then, finally, he speaks at length:

> I will go there! Sometimes I take goat sacrifice, and sometimes I take human sacrifice! I will eat the one who has tried to bind me . . . I will tell you everything, down to the very root. Adesh! to my mother, my father, my guru! Adesh! [He takes glowing coals in his hand.] Look, son, I will reach there before you do. Look, the first thing: I'm giving you ash and you must keep it with you. Second: you mustn't open it along the way. Third: you must go straight there and leave it—don't go to your own home along the way. I will do your work within a month, and I won't even take puja from anyone until then. If I don't succeed, then you lock up this *than*!

The guru is still bareheaded, listening with folded hands. He says once again that he is not the guru, but rather the *devta*'s *dhyan*. The oracle now marks his wife's forehead with ash, then turns and blows the rest of the ash out the door, signifying that the god has left. As he distributes ash to the others present, the guru tells him (using the English word) to "bury" the court case that Mangal Singh has brought against Rup Singh. He says that if Rup Singh has done any wrong, then the god should take care of him, too. Now the oracle bends over and begins making an eerie sound, rather like bubbles escaping from someone's mouth underwater. He looks up and the expression on his face is demonic! The room falls silent: we are all terrified by this horrific manifestation of the god! The oracle sticks out his tongue and licks up the ash lying in his palm, signifying that he will "eat" Mangal Singh. The guru says quietly that he should employ his knowledge of sorcery (*sabar vidya*) to do the job. The *devta* stretches out his ash-filled palm for the guru's blessing. The guru touches it, and wraps the ash in paper.

> Oracle: I shouldn't get a bad reputation.
>
> Guru: Why should you get a bad reputation? When the two parties come together to do your puja, then there will be no bad reputation.
>
> Oracle: If I have *shakti* I will bring both of them together [to worship]; if I have none, then how can I bring them [together]?

The guru places the packet of ash in the pocket of Rup Singh's jacket and tells him to take it straight to his enemy's house. If he or his companion must relieve themselves along the way, they should keep the ash separate. Now the

devta begins to toss rice grains into the air, and promises to answer the question in Rup Singh's mind.

> ORACLE: I shouldn't be making this judgment, but I will do it because you have come to my *than*. [He points to four grains in his hand.] This is me! This is me! One, two, three, four!
>
> GURU: What is it?
>
> ORACLE: You have one special god [*isth*], and a second one, too. Don't you? And I am the third one here, the *bahiyal*. It's me! Me! Me! Me! I am the *bahiyal* who is with them! And the one at the side is the [god of the] *than* itself.

Rup Singh asks if there is any other god involved, and the oracle says he is alone, the only one. Rup Singh repeats his question once or twice; I cannot understand why he is so intent on confirming that the god is alone. Suddenly, the oracle announces that he is the *churi halal walla*[18] and shouts "Salaam! Salaam!" Now it is clear to all that he is the Muslim demon Sayyid, and the guru begins reciting Sayyid's mantra at some length, giving his salaam to various figures associated with the *devta*, as well as instructions to Sayyid to destroy the enemy, including the "sons of the Hindus." The *devta* says that if anyone tries to stop him or thwart him, he will possess him and make him insane. The guru cautions the client not to think of the god as "bound." On the contrary, the *devta* can manifest himself at any moment. "Remember," says the guru, "the god has promised to complete this work within a month. You may forget, but he will not!" The oracle's trance is now over, and he asks the guru to tell him what the god said. The guru does so, summarizing what the god said during the possession, and adds that no one will disturb the oracle's family. "The god will protect your family," he says. "He will keep you in his cloth bag, he will keep you safe in the palm of his hand!" The guru completes this phase of the ritual with the Indra Kavach mantra (see chapter 4), to protect everyone from the dangerous work that lies ahead. That work is the animal sacrifice, which we do silently and with a minimum of light, so as not to be discovered. The pit of the *bahiyals* is excavated, and the half-cooked breads with offerings on them are placed in it along with the lamp. A goat and a chicken are both sacrificed *halal*-style, their throats slit so that the blood drips slowly into the pit. Wicks are put on the goat's head and the chicken's body. Rup Singh takes the topmost *ront* with the chicken's head and lit wick lying on it, and moves off into the darkness, toward the home of his enemy. Tomorrow Mangal Singh will find the chicken head on his doorstep, and know that he has been cursed, and is the victim of ritual aggression.

Thus ended the ritual in which Rup Singh hired a guru to send the god back. But what would Mangal Singh have said if he had been there, and observed the ritual in which he himself was being cursed? No doubt he would say that his rival, Rup Singh, was the aggressor, and that the guru was actually a sorcerer, a black magician. And this is precisely my point: that such judgments of morality are relational and ambivalent. Ambivalence is fundamental; it is built into the system. One initiates ritual aggression against some enemy, but this aggression cannot be recognized as such. It must be justified as defense. Even when one acts aggressively, one does not think of oneself as the initiator of violence, but rather as its victim. One is only defending oneself and one's family.

Something quite similar was discovered by the ethnologist Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980), in her research on witchcraft practices in rural France. In the Bocage, when someone believes that he has been attacked by a witch, he often seeks the help of an "unwitcher," a person who can fight against the witch on his behalf. Now, the crucial thing about this unwitcher is that, in order to defend the client against the witch, he or she uses the same methods as the witch. The unwitcher has the same relationship to the witch as the witch has to the victim. Or, to put it in other words: who is a witch, and who is an unwitcher, depends on one's perspective. But, as Favret-Saada observes, "ignoring this double reversal—from witch to bewitched and from unwitcher to witch—is fundamental to their discourse, or to their claim to maintain their position: whatever they do, they consider they are on the side of right or good; but whatever [the enemy] does, he is on the side of excess or evil because they accord him the first move in the magic aggression. From then on, whatever he suffers only serves him right" (1980: 71–72).

We saw a similar dynamic in one of the earlier examples, taken from the oracular session. The client claimed that it was someone else within the family who had first "summoned the god," but throughout their conversation, the oracle constantly suggested that it was in fact the client who had done so. Perhaps she did this because in so many cases, even though clients represent themselves as victims, they turn out to have committed the first act of magical aggression after all. Later in the same session, the client admitted to the oracle that he had indeed laid the first curse. And there are further examples of sending the god back that turn out in fact to be instances of sending the god. To admit this, however, would be to cast oneself in the role of the magical aggressor, the sorcerer, the person who has transgressed the borders of morality. No one would do this except for a deliberately immoral person, and in my experience, such persons are very rare indeed.

Postcript

Ritual Healing and Modernity

How do we represent the claims to knowledge of healers in another society, given the authority of biomedical knowledge? . . . How do we maintain a conviction that popular medical cultures represent genuine local knowledge, given the corrosive authority of biomedical science and the obvious efficacy of its preventive and therapeutic measures?

—Byron J. Good, *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience*

In the Field

The first time I ever spoke about the research presented in this book was at the Institute for the Study of Human Behavior and Allied Sciences in Delhi, informally known as the "Old Madhouse" because an asylum was previously located there. My colleague Professor P. C. Joshi had invited me to give a talk to a group of medical professionals. I had only just begun the research and was glad to have the chance to discuss it with other academics. I told my learned audience of doctors and psychologists about the system of oracles and gurus, showed them a brief video clip, and advanced a tentative version of the thesis with which I will end this chapter: that ritual healing sometimes "works" by addressing the social causes of stress-related disorders. After concluding my talk, I expected an enthusiastic round of applause and a stimulating

discussion. What I got instead was outrage. “How dare you conduct research on such a topic?” they asked. “This is nothing more than primitive, superstitious nonsense! You should be spending your time stamping out this sort of thing, not conducting research on it!”

Perhaps I should have expected such a reaction. After all, these were men of science, and the idea that ritual healing might have therapeutic benefits comparable to those of biomedicine seemed ridiculous to them, perhaps even insulting. They reminded me of the Nepali doctors discussed by Vincanne Adams, who were exposed for such a long time to modern critiques of ritual healing (particularly by exponents of “development”) that they began to regard such practices as evidence of backwardness (1998: 12). Such a scenario is hardly limited to South Asia. Leith Mullings has shown that in Ghana, family-based ritual therapy gave way to individual therapy under the modernizing influences of capitalism and Christianity, and the transformation of villages into towns (1984: 121, 133–85). To be “modern” and scientific normally involves rejecting the theories and practices associated with ritual healing, because they lie outside contemporary paradigms of science, modernity, and development. Those who seek to defend or preserve ritual healing thus risk marking themselves—and perhaps even coming to understand themselves—as “non-modern and deviant” (Nandy and Visvanathan 1990; cf. Pigg 1995), and this is as true of the “modernizing” cultures of Africa and Asia as it is of Europe and North America. Perhaps it is even truer there, since local elites in such places are surrounded by the practice of ritual healing, and must therefore work even harder than their western colleagues to distinguish themselves from those who engage in it. Kendall cites cases from Cypress and Sri Lanka that illustrate “the middle class’s identification with ‘science’ or with more ‘rational’-seeming religious practices as a means of asserting and naturalizing class domination. . . . The point here is not that the new elites’ posture toward popular religion is an inevitable consequence of ‘modernity’ so much as it represents the self-conscious inhabiting of new class positions” (2001: 30).

While I was conducting the fieldwork for this book, my village friends kept asking me a simple, three-word question: *Yaham kuchh hai?* Literally, this means, “Is there something here?” But there is more to the question than meets the eye, and I would paraphrase it as “You are a highly educated person and have been investigating these things for years. So tell me: Is there some special religious power here in our holy land of Uttarakhand? Is there such a thing as miraculous healing? Have you seen it? (And if you have, please tell me about it!)” After I had been asked this question several times, I found myself wondering if the skepticism lying behind it was something recent. Was there a time when local peasants accepted the efficacy of ritual healing without a doubt? Were the

modest doubts implicit in this question a result of modern education? Would they grow?

I observed plenty of skepticism in other contexts as well. Especially memorable was the family settled in Delhi who returned to their ancestral village in the mountains for a major healing ritual, but whose father was so dismissive of the entire affair that he refused to attend the key events, while the teenage children found the possessed "dancing" ridiculous and laughable, and were unable to participate in it properly when their turns came. (Eventually, their grandmother saved the day—and the ritual—by vigorously dancing for more than a quarter of an hour, which was itself a kind of miraculous occurrence since she was more than ninety years old.) Then there were the educated persons I knew, especially those in the medical professions, who condemned the practices of the gurus as unscientific and superstitious, but surreptitiously visited them when their own problems could not be solved by modern medicine. In the end, I came to share Adams's view that the overt rejection of ritual healing was not so much a statement of disbelief in its efficacy as it was an assertion of one's social position: modern, educated, and scientific.

Discourses of modernity were also to be found in the religious realm, where local religious practices, often involving bloody sacrifice, were being replaced by modern, high-caste, vegetarian ones. Once I met Darpal just after he had successfully treated a client, and he shook with rage as he told me how a group of *satsangis* (followers of a local religious leader) had harassed him as he walked through the bazaar, shouting out that the gurus and their knowledge should be stamped out. "I was coming here last night," he said,

> and they started giving me a hard time, shouting "Down with the gurus! Down with the gurus' knowledge!" So I said to them, "You mother-fucking *satsangis*, a girl is in trouble! *You* go there! *You* heal her! Take your *satsangi* doctors!" What do doctors do here? They give injections—the needle might break, and kill the girl! I put the mark on her forehead and forced the god to identify himself and to appear. And once he was there we got the whole decision [*faisla*]: "I live at such and such a place, and so forth; worship me and I will be satisfied, otherwise I will definitely eat this girl [*kha hi lunga*]." Can the s*atsangi*s do that?

He said that the *satsangi*s were making quite a stir, and that so many people were joining them that they had multiplied like a bitch's pups. He accused them of hypocrisy, of pretending to be *satsangi*s on the outside but continuing to practice the old rituals behind closed doors. And he linked their "modern" rejection of ritual healing to an equally modern refusal to uphold traditional

norms of ritual reciprocity. "Just let them come here, and we'll beat them with our shoes! On the outside, those bastards are saying that they're *satsangi*s, but indoors they're making all the Brahmans dance. They worship Masan in their houses, and the gods dance there, but on the outside they are all *satsangi*s. But they don't do puja! The god comes hungry, and he leaves hungry." Darpal's companion reinforced his accusation that the *satsangi*s were behaving in a thoroughly modern, individualistic way. "Whatever rice they get, they eat by themselves. They're doing well, but what is the goddess eating? She left as hungry as she came, but their own stomachs are full."

Some "modern" local healers even pursue their calling without ritual, thus making their practice appear more "scientific" and less "religious," both to their clients and to themselves (cf. Press 1971). S. B. Sati was the senior postman in Joshimath at the time of my research, and he was also an oracle—but one with a difference. Partly because of his own education and professional status, and partly because of his location in a major stopover on the most prominent pilgrimage routes in India, he had developed an elite clientele consisting of politicians, educators, doctors, and similar persons from all over India. Sati was well known to the learned classes and professionals of his district, many of whom had consulted him, and his style was radically different from the usual oracular style of the area, the most striking difference being the complete absence of ritual. He recited no prayers, lit no incense, and did not become possessed. Sati's clients did not even remove their shoes when they visited him. His sessions resembled medical or psychological consultations more than oracular ones. He would begin by drawing a map or a sketch of the client's home, and then proceed to diagnose the cause of their problems. The causes he would diagnose (cursing, familial strife, demonic affliction, supernatural "poisoning") were very similar to those diagnosed in other, more typical consultations by entranced oracles, as were his therapeutic prescriptions: mostly rituals of a familiar sort, but also the wearing of amulets (which he himself made) and other sorts of astrological and gem therapy. When I interviewed him, Sati made fascinating allusions to his own history as an oracle, saying that he used to become possessed, but gave it up many years ago, and now only "causes others to become possessed." I believe that his highly unusual practice reflected the needs and expectations of his modern, educated clientele.

Clearly there was a kind of struggle occurring in Garhwal over ritual healing; but it had less to do with the question of whether these rituals "worked" or not than it did with the question of "modernity" and one's attitude toward it. People may well regard ritual practices as efficacious, but still refuse to participate in them because to do so is to stigmatize themselves as premodern and nonscientific.

Modernity and "Development"

In social theory, the conversation regarding modernity begins with (and always returns to) Marx and Weber. Marx saw the tremendous creative (and destructive) power of modern capitalism, accompanied by a rapid influx of workers into the industrializing cities and the creation of a corresponding proletariat, and he formulated his class analysis in response. More than half a century later, Weber perceived a radical difference between the modern life of Heidelberg and the vestiges of a traditional society still visible in the countryside, just a short distance away. But he also saw that social distinction was based not merely on class but also on culture, on particular lifestyles supported by specific forms of consumption, and he therefore extended and developed Marx's insights with a more subtle analysis of the status group (German *Stand*).[1] For Weber, modernity was the phase of history characterized by secularization, a capitalist mode of production, the professionalization of work, the rising power of state bureaucracies, and the individualization of personhood. Crucial for both Marx and Weber, as well as for subsequent theorists of modernity, was the idea that it was something completely new, an unprecedented kind of human experience brought about by new forms of production.

In the 1950s and 1960s, modernization theory was enthusiastically supported by many of the newly liberated, postcolonial states, who believed that they would be strengthened when premodern loyalties (to ethnic group, regional language, tribe, caste, and above all religion—collectively designated "primordial loyalties") were abandoned for secular, democratic, and national—that is, thoroughly modern—loyalties, values, and ideas. Modernization theory failed utterly, of course, for empirical as well as theoretical reasons. On the empirical side, democracy was by no means implemented everywhere. Religion did not decline, but instead grew in importance, and continues to do so, at an increasingly rapid rate. Modernization has not reduced claims of ethnic diversity, but instead exacerbated them. On the theoretical side, modernization theory has been criticized for its explicitly teleological orientation (that is, its assumption that there is a single, universal form of modernity toward which all societies tend) and for its assumption of a universal rational subject. One of the most penetrating of such critiques is that of the philosopher Charles Taylor (1993), who criticizes modernization theory for its "acultural," universal assumptions, and, following Bourdieu, insists on the importance of practices, and not merely ideas, in the arising of modernity. Recently, a number of theorists (e.g., Eisenstadt [2000] and Gaonkar [2001]) have attempted to revive parts of modernization theory under the rubric of "alternative modernities."

In effect, this is modernization theory minus both the teleology and the universalism. One of the most interesting of these attempts is that of the political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj, who argues that "there is a logic of self-differentiation in modernity" such that the more it expands to different parts of the world, the more it becomes "differentiated and plural" (2005: 497).

The most relevant theorist for a discussion of ritual healing and modernity is the French historian of science Bruno Latour, whose book *We Have Never Been Modern* questions the whole idea that there is or ever was a unique historical moment called "modernity." Latour claims that the idea of modernity has always functioned ideologically, to distinguish self from other ("We've got it, but you don't"), and the empirical failures of modernization theory mentioned above tend to bear him out, since "nonmodern" ideas and practices have remained strong, and are even proliferating in many places (for example among right-wing Christian cults in the United States). Although Latour is sometimes associated with deconstructionism, he has always insisted on recognizing the achievements of science, technology, and medicine. He does, however, insist that they are not to be explained in terms of some world-epochal shift to "modernity," but rather in terms of what he calls "networks" (of agency, technology, and so forth).

Even though modernization theory has failed, the idea of modernity has retained its rhetorical allure, especially in the so-called third world. For many people in the poorer countries of the planet, "modernity" is synonymous with much that is felt to be lacking in their own countries, but present in "the West." In this sense, modernity is like one of its purported elements, democracy: everyone wants it, even though they understand rather different things by it. But in Chamoli district, there is something that is even more strongly desired than modernity and democracy, and that is "development." From government officials to high school teachers to the peasants in the fields, the word "development" (*vikas*) is on everyone's lips, despite a lack of consensus as to what it is. Development is thought of as an unqualified good that brings greater prosperity, increased literacy, and a better-functioning democracy. It is a part of modernity, or an avenue to it, and has an important intellectual dimension; what Nehru referred to as the cultivation of a "scientific temper." Stacey Pigg (1995) has shown that for Nepalis, local shamanic healing is associated with underdevelopment, and the same is true of Chamoli. In this view of development and modernity, science is explicitly contrasted with "superstition," just as medicine is contrasted with ritual. These oppositions function to distinguish self from other on many different levels. The "developed/modern/scientific" Westerner distinguishes himself from the "underdeveloped/premodern/superstitious third-worlder," while the third-worlder intensely desires to be modern, developed, and scientific (without necessarily giving up his religious and cultural

traditions, which must therefore be reconfigured). Reformers in the "third world" pursue their programs in the name of science and modernity, while antimodernists in the "developed" world seek to reclaim traditional, spiritual values. All of this is reflected in modern understandings of ritual, and especially ritual healing.

A Term of Suspicion

Under conditions of modernity in the West, "ritual" has become a term of suspicion. In public discourse it has come to mean something purely formal, external, meaningless, pointless, and above all, *ineffective*. According to our meteorological theories, dancing cannot make it rain, and so when someone performs a rain dance, we call it a ritual. According to our anthropological theories, one cannot fundamentally change a person's nature by cutting or tattooing his or her body, and so when people do such things in the course of an initiation, we call it a ritual. According to our medical theories, disease cannot be cured by sacrificing goats to the ancestors, and so when people claim to have done so, we label it ritual. Public figures constantly reiterate the idea that rituals don't actually *do* anything. Speaking of her visit to Paris in November 2005 for example, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "This has to do, not with ritual, but rather with deep conviction."[2] In popular discourse, the term "ritual" usually means an action that is ineffective, and this explains why it is that, even though scholars of ritual cannot agree on a definition of it, they "know it when they see it"—and what they know to be rituals when they see them are apparently irrational actions, where the means do not seem proportionate to the ends, where the intended objects of the actions are nonempirical beings, or where the theories of efficacy that ostensibly explain the acts are inconsistent with modern, scientific paradigms. Thus one can say of ritual what Latour says of "modernity"—that it is a term which functions in a rhetorical way to distinguish the rational from the irrational. Foucault defined the modern episteme as the conditions of possibility for what counts as scientific, and I am arguing that "ritual" is precisely the *negation* of this modern, scientific episteme—which is what makes it so interesting.

Similar points have been made by Goody (1977) and by Lukes (1975), who shows that, in practice, the scholar of ritual recognizes his object when he sees certain actions that seem disproportionate to their ostensible ends. In other words, when we see certain kinds of activities and beliefs that strike us as irrational, we label them "ritual" (1975: 290). We do not refer to driving an automobile or playing football or taking an examination as rituals, even though they

involve highly formal, rule-bound behavior—we only call activities rituals when the means they employ and the ends to which they are directed do not match up, when they do not correspond to our criteria of rationality, or better yet, of efficacy. It is precisely the assumed ineffectiveness of certain kinds of actions that make us regard them as rituals in the first place. That is why, for most scholars of ritual, the intellectual task consists in trying to find out rituals' hidden logic, their deeper meaning—which must be other than that reported by the natives, since it strikes us as irrational.

On the other hand, for those performing the rain dance, or the initiation, or the healing, the practices we call rituals are indeed consistent with a cosmology, in terms of which they are perfectly logical and rational. And that is why the natives typically do not refer to such activities as rituals, but rather as dancing, or healing, or simply as "work," as Raymond Firth pointed out in his classic ethnography of ritual, *The Work of the Gods in Tikopia*. To put it in a nutshell: what *we* see as ritual, *they* see as technique. My point is that the term "ritual" is our term, and it reflects our problem—how to classify a certain set of apparently irrational, or better, apparently *ineffective*, acts.

But the problem is a false one, because not all rituals are ineffective. We know that shamanic rituals heal, legal rituals bind, political rituals ratify, and religious rituals sanctify. Rituals transform public space into prohibited sanctuary, citizens into presidents, single persons into married couples, and even, according to some, wine into blood. I have already argued that "ritual" is a term that is applied to actions that appear to be non-scientific. But how, then, do they achieve their effects? In attempting to answer this question, we must remember that ritual is not a natural kind; it is not some *thing* out there in the world with a finite set of characteristics that can be identified and listed. Rather, the word "ritual" is like "religion," "economics," "politics," and so forth. It refers to a set of similar but not identical practices, and so it calls for a definition based on what the philosopher Wittgenstein called "family resemblances" rather than essential characteristics. The idea is that although members of a family are not identical, they do share enough similar features—manner of speaking, facial shape, eye color, and so forth—that one can recognize them as being related. Now, rituals are clearly not all identical: they involve different actions, and are performed in different cultures and languages, for different purposes. Nevertheless we can observe that certain characteristics are widely shared by that class of activities that we label "ritual," so that when some activity has a sufficient number of them, it counts as a member of the category.

What are the characteristics shared by the family of practices that we call rituals? I have already identified one of the most important ones: rituals contradict the modern epistéme by appearing to be non-scientific. In a brilliant essay,

Stanley Tambiah (1979) has listed a number of further characteristics: rituals are formal, stereotyped, repetitive, and so forth.[3] I find his model compelling, and everything I have written in this book is consistent with it. But the characteristics listed by Tambiah have primarily to do with the way in which rituals are performed, whereas I wish to concentrate on their effects, on what they do. One thing that rituals do is create and define social relationships. One of the clearest examples of this is large, public rituals in which a certain image of society is represented, underlined, defined, created, and embodied. By participating in such rituals, we give our assent to this representation. In processions, for example, certain objects representing the fundamental values of society—the flag, the cross, the sacred relic—are carried and displayed as if to say, "These are our highest values." Social relationships are also on display. Political and religious officials lead the procession, or they observe it from their platform on high. Who goes first? Who goes last? Who has an escort? Who walks alone? Who wears a uniform? All of these ritual details are important, because they represent and create a set of actual, or ideal, social and political relationships. The order of the procession is, in short, the order of society, with its hierarchy and its power relations, and in publicly representing this order, we give it legitimacy; we make it real.[4]

Political party meetings are another example. Who speaks first? Who speaks last? Who gets the loudest applause? Who is defined as speaker, and who is defined as listener? When is the music played? What objects are displayed on the stage? What insignia are worn by the party faithful? Such rituals are carefully staged in order to represent a certain order, a set of power relations, a vision of the party and its internal hierarchy. This dramatic staging becomes ever more important our age of mass media, when hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people witness the ritual on their television screens. In a certain sense, "the Party" as a concrete *thing* exists only during such public rituals, which thereby define and, in a certain sense, create it. One could make the same argument about the Catholic Mass, the opening of Parliament, the graduation from school or university, or the wedding. In all of these cases, public rituals represent and legitimize the relations that constitute our social life, and in doing so, they create them. This ritual constitution of our social life is not a matter of words or ideas, but rather of embodiment. The creative power of ritual has little to do with belief or "states of mind," and everything to do with bodily participation. It doesn't really matter what a person *thinks* about the relations being defined by the ritual. Indeed, in the privacy of one's own thoughts, one may regard the political leader as an idiot. Nevertheless, by participating in the ritual, one assents to the political order, one affirms it. The only way to sabotage such a ritual is to stay away, or to organize a counter-ritual

that represents society in a different way. As the social psychologist Thomas Szasz has written, “In the animal world, the rule is: Eat or be eaten. In the human world, the rule is: Define or be defined” (1974: 20). To put it in a nutshell, rituals dramatically and authoritatively represent some condition or state of affairs, and by participating in the ritual, members of the community affirm the truth of this representation.[5]

But such a definition does not seem immediately applicable to ritual healing. How could a “mere” ritual heal cancer, or the flu, or a broken leg? Posing the question in this way returns us to the problem with which I began: the implausibility (to “modern,” rational, post-Enlightenment intellectuals) that a ritual could be of therapeutic value. This is due not only to the fact that ritual is a “term of suspicion,” but also to the universal dominance of biomedicine. No doubt one of the reasons why biomedicine achieved this dominance so quickly was because of its association with imperial power and the prestige of modernity.[6] Still, it would be silly to deny that its success also has much to do with its efficacy. While it may be difficult to show that Freudian psychoanalysis relieves depression more effectively than exorcism, it is easy to show that the smallpox vaccine is more effective than ritual for combating smallpox (Tambiah 1990, chap. 6). Moreover the natives seem to agree, since the smallpox goddess, after the eradication of the disease, either disappeared or came to be associated with other diseases (Egnor 1984; Ecks 2000; Nicholas 1981). In short, biomedicine is in many cases astoundingly effective, so how could ritual healing compete?

The unequal terms of the comparison are reproduced in the medical journals, where “ritual” is defined as a practice that lacks therapeutic efficacy and should therefore be eliminated from medicine (Bolande 1969; Greer 1994; Parker 1999, 2002; Sinclair 2004; but cf. Wall 1996).[7] For the contributors to medical journals, medicine is seen as pure technique, universal and noncultural: an appendectomy is an appendectomy, regardless of whether it is performed in Abu Dhabi, Albuquerque, or Australia, and the social context of the operation, the respective backgrounds of surgeon and patient—in fact, anything that does not relate to formal surgical technique—are irrelevant to it as a surgical operation. As Latour (1993) has argued, this attempt to “purify” science by rigorously separating it from its social and cultural context is at the very core of the ideology of modernity, and although such a separation is in fact neither possible nor sustainable, sciences like biomedicine nevertheless insist on attempting to do so. Writing of “the sanctioned sciences” like mathematics (or the science of appendectomies), which seem so clearly to be noncultural and noncontextual, Latour argues that “they become scientific only because they tear themselves away from all context, from any traces of

contamination by history, from any naive perception, and escape even their own past" (1993: 92). It is precisely this separation from social context that makes modern science, including biomedicine, so effective. It has perfected its techniques of measurement and analysis, and simultaneously extended its networks around the planet, so that its therapeutic results and social consequences have become universally valid, confirmed by millions of successful repetitions (1993: 112ff.).

But the astounding results of medical knowledge come at a price, which is the fragmentation of the human body, along with the fragmentation of medicine, into ever more specialized subdisciplines. There are specialists for eyes, ears, and teeth; for the heart, the liver, and the womb. There are kidney specialists, colon specialists, and brain specialists. They have done wonderful things, they have increased our knowledge a thousandfold, they have developed therapies that no one even dreamed of even ten years ago. Such knowledge is effective, but also limited and narrow. Indeed, it is effective *because* it is narrow. It is focused on the particular, it heals the part and not the person. For a vision of holistic medicine, one must turn to theorists like the great German pathologist and social activist Rudolph Virchow, who criticized the fragmented definition of sickness (*Krankheit*) as an external *thing*—what he called the "ontological conception"—and proposed his own definition:

> If sickness is nothing other than life under altered conditions, then healing, in general, means the production of the usual, normal conditions of life or the production of its usual, normal processes. The destruction of the ontological conception of diseases is also the destruction of ontological therapy, the school of the particularists. The object of therapy is not diseases, but rather conditions; everywhere this has to do only with changing the conditions of life.[8]

Healing and Curing

One might paraphrase all of this by saying that modern clinical researchers have made impressive strides in curing, but know little about healing, which for them is an "embarrassing word" (Kleinman 1979: 7). But what, precisely, is "healing"? The English words "health" and "healing," like the German words "Heil" and "Heilung," derive from the Indo-European root *kailo*, meaning "whole" and "uninjured" (Morris 1979: 1520). From this root a semantic field develops that includes a number of closely related concepts: "health," "whole," "the holy." To be healthy is to be whole, and to heal is to make a fragmented,

sick person into a whole person, complete and holy. No wonder that the World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." To heal, then, is to restore well-being to a person who is ill, and that well-being is not only a matter of their physical condition, but also of social and interpersonal relationships. To define health in the old-fashioned way, as a purely physical state, is to repeat the tired dualism of a philosophy that separates mind from body. This is a false dualism, and it is an unhealthy one. Healing (as opposed to curing) does not affect only the body; it affects the entire human being. It does not only work on the parts of the body, it also integrates those parts into a healthy person, and it integrates that person with his or her society, sometimes even with the cosmos.

That is why Kleinman argues that "in most cases indigenous practitioners must heal . . . (and) modern professional clinical care must fail to heal" (1979: 24). In making this argument, Kleinman makes a distinction between disease and illness; that is, between the purely biological causes and consequences of sickness on the one hand (disease), and the human and social experience of them (illness) on the other. Traditional healers, says Kleinman, are particularly good at uncovering the social roots of illness, but they don't worry too much about the "theoretical fine points." In short, they treat both illness and disease, whereas medical doctors only treat disease. When a ritual healer is confronted with a broken leg, he knows what to do: he sends the patient to a medical doctor. But when a medical doctor is confronted with a patient suffering from a curse, what is he to do?

It would be a mistake to evaluate the efficacy of one therapy, be it medical, ritual, psychological, herbal, or whatever, in terms of another, but we do this all the time when we evaluate (and, normally, dismiss) ritual healing in terms of biomedicine. Ritual healing may well be ineffective according to biomedical criteria, but the opposite is also true: biomedical treatment is normally ineffective in meeting those needs that are addressed by ritual healing. Most forms of ritual healing have to do with the whole person, with his social and spiritual aspects as well as his physical ones, and therefore do not lend themselves to the kinds of precise measurement that are the basis of biomedicine's success.[9] Biomedicine has one set of criteria, precisely measurable and related to the reduction of bodily symptoms, while the criteria against which one evaluates ritual healing depend on the perspective taken. The healer might well have one set of criteria for success, the patient another, and his family yet another. And what criteria should the ethnologist apply?

In the end, the paradigms of biomedicine and ritual healing are radically different from each other, and so are their criteria of efficacy. On the one hand,

a worldwide web of doctors, hospitals, universities, clinics, journals, experiments, and professional associations works to ensure that practices are standardized, and that efficacy is evaluated according to universal criteria, "purified" of their social and historical context; on the other hand are the thousands of isolated traditions of ritual healing that attempt, through a myriad of techniques and a veritable Babel of idioms, to reintegrate afflicted persons, their families, and their communities. And of course they do so in terms of particular cultural contexts, which are always local. Ritual healing resists the disciplinary practices of the state and of biomedicine—and so it must, or else lose the very context-sensitivity that defines it.

That is one reason why it so difficult to integrate traditional healing into government health programs. An official health regime requires the systematization of practices, so that they can be monitored, controlled, and improved (Hoff 1995; Puckree et al 2002; Weiser 1999). Traditional healing, on the other hand, is generally much less systematic than biomedicine, and therefore recalcitrant to such standardization. Even when programs for the integration of traditional healers are approved and implemented, the social distance between healers and medical officers is usually so great that it impedes any meaningful exchange (Haram 1991). With the introduction of "modern" biomedicine, traditional knowledge systems are defined as inferior, nonscientific, and superstitious; in short, as forms of ignorance, as the title of Hobart's brilliant study (1993) of the development industry implies. Usually, health authorities are structurally blind to the existence and importance of traditional ritual healing. Some colleagues in Sri Lanka once boasted to me that because of a fortuitous set of historical circumstances, they had one of the most thorough and accurate set of health statistics in the world. They had data on practically every visit to a doctor, dentist, or hospital that was made in the entire country, and on the social and economic backgrounds and the health histories of those making the visits. "That's terrific!" I replied. "What about traditional healers? What about Ayurveda?" Unfortunately, they said, there was no information on such visits, despite the fact that Ayurveda, along with traditional and ritual healing, is highly developed and quite common in Sri Lanka. Ritual healers often adjust to such blindness by taking on the appearance, accoutrements, or language of biomedicine (Greene 1998; Press 1971; Whyte 1989: 294–95). Meanwhile, the World Health Organization claims to be interested in traditional healing techniques and even encourages research on them, but its interest is limited to those kinds of healing that can be accommodated within a biomedical model: massage, diet, bone-setting, and, above all, herbalism (World Health Organization 1978, 2002). Ritual healing is by no means on the list.

But Does It Work?

For more than a hundred years, ethnologists have conducted research on ritual healing in cultures throughout the world, and collected thousands of pages of (mostly anecdotal) evidence that rituals do indeed heal. In fact, when people suffer from serious or life-threatening illness, they usually perform rituals, and this applies as much to the man or woman from Heidelberg or Houston who goes to the church to pray after contracting a serious disease, as to the Asian or African who visits a ritual healer. Fortunately, when I gave that public lecture in the Old Madhouse in Delhi, there was someone in the audience who knew this: a social worker and psychologist who had been posted to Chamoli District during the 1960s and 1970s. He told my audience of medical doctors that even after the introduction of modern medicine, local people didn't give up their old traditions of ritual healing. And why should they? In most places, the introduction of biomedicine does not lead to the extinction of traditional healing, but rather to the creation of new, hybrid forms. Reissland and Burghart (1989) have shown that in North India, biomedicine incorporated traditional ritual healing into its practical routines, and Greene has noted conversely that South American shamans incorporate the language of biomedicine into their rituals (1998: 640–641). Clearly, the idea that scientific rationality leads to the demise of ritual healing (Garfinkel 1967) is false, as is the image of the "rational, value-maximizing individual responding adaptively to disease" (Good 1994: 44)—at least if "rationality" is taken to involve the rejection of ritual. Despite powerful critiques from modernity, ritual healing persists and even flourishes, not only in the "third" and "fourth" worlds (Connor 2001; Kendall 1996, 2001: 32; Laderman 2001: 60; World Health Organization 2002: 1–2, 9–15), but also in the richest and most industrialized countries (Cant and Sharma 1999; Puckree et al. 2002; Weiser 1999).[10] Traditional forms of healing, including ritual healing, do not disappear just because biomedicine is introduced. It would be silly to expect them to do so, because they meet certain human needs that biomedicine does not address.

An extensive literature on medical pluralism shows that patients choose ritual healers for a number of reasons: on the basis of ethnicity, accessibility, and cultural compatibility (Heggenhougen 1980; Minocha 1980; Bhardwaj and Paul 1986; Sidel and Sidel 1973), because of their alienation and/or class background (Baer 1989; Wolputte 2001), and sometimes simply because it costs less (Bhardwaj and Paul 1986). Given the "modern" critique of ritual healing outlined above, it is not surprising that the literature on medical pluralism rarely considers the idea that ritual healing persists because it does what it says—it

heals. Even in the medical anthropology of ritual healing, the question of its efficacy has received surprisingly little attention, despite Kleinman's assertion that this is "the central problem in the cross-cultural study of healing" (1979: 7). Yet ritual healing does have therapeutic value, and deserves to be understood as a human response to illness and misfortune.

At least three hypotheses regarding the efficacy of ritual healing can be identified. According to one hypothesis, rituals physically alter the body of the patient. Levi-Strauss famously argued that ritual "manipulates the sick organ" (1963: 192), but he failed to specify the mechanism. Others have advanced neurophysiological hypotheses to explain the efficacy of healing rituals (Av Ruskin 1988; d'Aquili, Laughlin, and McManus 1979; Laughlin, McManus, and d'Aquili 1992; Turner 1988: 156–178). In my view, the most promising studies in this area are those focusing on the so-called placebo effect (Brody 2000; Kaptchuk 2002; Moerman 2002), which show not only that placebos are extremely effective (often more so than standard biomedical techniques), but also that the efficacy of conventional medical therapy depends to a surprising degree on the healer's own confidence in his or her methods. Extrapolating, one might argue that when a ritual healer is convinced of the efficacy of his or her techniques, they are much more likely to be efficacious.

A second hypothesis is that ritual healing works by altering the consciousness of the patient. A seminal study here is Frank and Frank (1991 [1973]), who stress the "persuasive" powers of the healer and focus on the individual psyche, as does Thomas Csordas (1983, 1988, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2002), who analyses the imaginal, internal experiences of patients, and how these create or restore the integrated, "sacred self." The idea that ritual healing works by altering the consciousness of the patient is of course implicit in many other models, for example in Kapferer's (1983) discussion of Sri Lankan ritual healing and its use of humor to reestablish proper relationships between patient and afflicting demon, and Dow's classic (1986) model of "symbolic healing," in which problematic relationships are projected onto objects which are then manipulated to as to result in a cognitive reorientation on the part of the patient.

A third hypothesis regarding the efficacy of ritual healing begins with the observation that it is often not an individual patient who is the object of therapy, but rather a "social field"—a household, family, lineage, neighborhood, or village. It can plausibly be argued that many of the illnesses for which ritual healing is an effective remedy are caused by stressful relationships within the family, village, or workplace. In such cases, the healing ritual "works" by reorganizing and redefining these relationships, and the object of therapy is not an individual but a larger group (Worsley 1982: 336), not a particular disease or illness episode, but rather the general condition of the social unit (Kendall 2001).

Similar observations have been made of shamanic healing (Balzer 1983), of healing temples in India (Bhattacharyya 1986; Chakrabarti 1984; Halliburton 2003; Kakar 1982: 82–85), in Victor Turner's studies of affliction and healing (1967, 1968); and by me in several earlier publications (Sax 1994, 2000, 2002, 2004).

There are many kinds of ritual healing. Some are based on the induction of trances, dreams, or visions, others on the production and ingestion of ritually empowered medicine, still others on performing sacrifices to ancestors, gods or demons, and the list goes on and on. The only thing uniting these practices is that they are apparently irrational and ineffective from a modern point of view. Given the great diversity of such practices, it would be silly to pursue a single model to explain all of them. Some forms of ritual healing may indeed "work" through the physiological effects of herbs and plants administered in the course of a ritual, others by changing the perceptions of the patient. But for the healing rituals described in this book, the most appropriate model seems to be one according to which the ritual is directed toward a social field of relationships, rather than a particular individual. As chapters 5 and 6 clearly showed, family unity is a moral, a ritual, and a therapeutic principle in Garhwali culture. At the same time, the family is a major source of stress. Conflicts over land, abuse and exploitation of women, generational conflict, pressures to do well in school or to have children, and jealousy at others' successes are all common within the family, and can lead to stress-related illnesses, which are the most common sort of physical complaint associated with ritual healing.

From beginning to end, the healing cult of Bhairav works to consolidate the family as a unified, healthy, functioning whole. The oracular consultation seeks above all to determine if family disunity is the cause or symptom of supernatural affliction, and the rituals prescribed enforce family cooperation, representing and at the same time actualizing a model of a united family. They literally bind the family together with rope, they embody its substantial connection to the land from which it draws its sustenance, they require its members to swear a collective oath—and all of this is publicly witnessed and ratified by "the five." The healing rituals thus conform to my model of ritual as sketched earlier, in which an ideal normative and social order—in this case an integrated family, free of internal conflict—is publicly represented, affirmed, and *made real* by the physical participation of its members. What seems deeply misleading to me is to say that the ritual merely "symbolizes" this unity. On the contrary, it is important to recognize that if healing takes place by means of ritual, this is not a matter of bringing into congruence beliefs expressed in language, but rather of articulating the embodied experiences of the participants. The *dikara* image that the priest fashions out of barley flour and water is not a metaphor,

but rather the concrete embodiment of the god or the ancestor. Possession and affliction with their associated stress do not simply "represent" disturbed relations, they embody them. As the priest says, bad feelings must be left behind, but this is done in a physical, practical way, by depositing them in the image and sacrificing to it. The priest restores proper social relations through embodied ritual action, and the patient is healed.

In this postscript, I have attempted to show that the question "Does ritual healing work?" is deeply inflected by modernity, with its suspicion of ritual and its fragmentation of the body. I have also suggested that such modernist assumptions are flawed, and that ritual healing may indeed "work." Does this mean that my argument is antimodern? If modernity implies the standardization and normalization of healing practices, and the decontextualization or "disembedding" (Giddens 1990: 21 ff.) of local forms of knowledge and practice, then I would indeed argue that it is neither inevitable, nor necessarily good for our health. Other cultural worlds, other systems of healing, and other criteria for health and illness have existed and will continue to exist alongside those that are produced and sanctioned by "modernity," and we should think twice before dismissing them.



FIGURE P.1. Drawing by Prem Mohan Dobhal.

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Appendix

TEXT 1

calā merā siddho sarvā nīlakaṇṭho
tumāre māmo kī lagīṃ baḍ-pīpal dhunī
gae gobar kī dhunī
radhu candan kī dhunī

hāth joṛi-joṛi kar māmūjī kī sevā
ek hāth dhar arag-dhūpyāṇī
ek hāth dhar māyārūpī saṅkh

tab gāḍī dyav gāyārūpī ghāṇḍ
saṅkh paḍyā sor ghāṇāḍo ghamanāṭ

jobārī kā jau gāḍyā tilbārī kā til
apaṇī māmū kī tum stutī baṇauṇ

pailī kī babūt jogyo māmū kā kailās
tab kī babūt āphū jogī ramyūndā
tab kī babūt kheḍū maradaṅg
tab kī babūt gurū kī āsan
tab kī babūt boṭiyā kā ghar
tab kī babūt sagarī sansār
tumārī babūt jogyā suphal phalāyā

TEXT 2

1. jai gurū jai gurū jai avināśī svāmī
2. bāhumaṇḍal meṃ gurū avināśī ne kyā khyāl raṅcāyo?

3. hor gurū kā hor nād bājā tumārā bājā svāmī har sing kā nād
4. kaun gurū ne kān phaḍāyā, kaun gurū ne muṇḍ de muṇḍāyā?
5. kaun gurū ne tumunī panth jo batāyā?
6. kaun saṅgh calegā, kaun bāt bolegā, merā avināśī siddho?
7. lāṭhī saṅgh calegī, cimaṭā bāt bolegā
8. tumārī svāmī siddho pāṭh kī mekhalā
9. pāṭh kī dī mekhalā, dhunī dhār kī cimaṭā
10. merā avināśī svāmī, ye patthar to dī phāvaḍī svāmī
11. tumuṇī svāmī o sailā laṅgoṭī

(tune changes)

12. gurū jī la bajailī tero kuro dīlo nāda
13. ye siddho tumāre kānūṃ māṃ pauḍegī jab nād bed sor
14. ye ādhe saṅghebolaṇū bābā, tero kherū khaṇḍ mahāpanth
15. ye ādhe saṅghebolaṇū bābā, tero meṃ dīpū māṃ dekho dīpū
16. dīpoṃ mā deī ko dīp holo jambūdīpe māṃ dīpe
17. ādhe saṅghebolaṇū bābā, terā uttarākhaṇḍ kī bhūmī
18. ye ādhe saṅghebolaṇū bābā terā māmū kā kailās
19. jai māmū kā holā tum āgyākārī gaṇ

(tune changes)

20. ādhe saṅghe bolaṇū bābā, terā bhairoṃ kob bār māga
21. kob bār māga holo jab udotū—sudotū

(tune changes)

22. udotū - sudotū ṭamotā raṇ chayā kob bār māga
23. tanārī holī bhagavān jab cetā made dhyāṇ
24. umedā sumedā holī tanālī lāḍulī dhyāṇ . . .

TEXT 3

1 jāg re kacyā bābā, chām kā bichauṇā jāg
2 malīj kā koṭhā, nirmoī ghāt meṃ
3 sākhanī sampatt, ritunī basant
4 vahāṃ kamariyūṃ kā rās lagantāya
5 jāg re kacyā mṛkhaṇḍī ghāṭ meṃ
6 jahāṃ tavāliyoṃ kā nāc langantāyo
7 jāg re kacyā tirpaṇi ghāṭ meṃ
8 jahāṃ tere chām kā bichauṇā malīj kā koṭhā
9 vahām rohī kā mañgal gāyā jātā hai
10 to jāg re kacyā ādhe rāt vālī ādhe rāt pālī
11 to selā gunjā ghāṭ meṃ bharoṇyūm kā rāṅgkā
12 to selā gunjā ghāṭ meṃ kulāṛī sabad bajte haiṃ
13 to murde kī kaṭkūṛī lagtī hai
14 to jāg re kacyā śelā gunjā ghāṭ mām

15 jahāṃ havan kī cauṃrī bantī hai
16 to jāg re kacyā, bahut din ho gaye haiṃ, par murde nahīṃ āye

TEXT 4

kveī aṣṭhadhātū kāraṇ?
kveī lohādhātū kāraṇ?
kveī nāmadhātū kāraṇ?
kveī ujjal jīniś kāraṇ?
kveī ujjal vastra kāraṇ?

kveī bhūmī sambandh māṃ?
kveī makān jīnis māṃ?
kveī caupāy asur jīb?
kveī paśu jīb khātir māṃ?

to dhāmī dupāy par cal rahā hai
dupāy saṃbandh māṃ jāñc huṇ cha bal
dekh bal dupāy mām bhī
dekh bal strī kāraṇ māṃ boṇ laigyūṃ cha bal

haṃ na kā javāb deṇ cha bal

parivār sambandhī jācanā huṇ cha bal
strī puruṣ bāl-gopāl
dupāy-caupāy jīmī-bhūmī
pūrī parivār kī jācanā calaṇ lagī cha bal

dhāmī, koī parivār māṃ khāṭ paṇyā nī
koī jū-hairanā nī?
koī assī sāl kā vṛddh nī cha bal
koī choṭā dūdh pyaṇ bālak nī cha bal

umar māṃ calaṇ cha bal
cal-vical māṃ paḍyāṃ bal
cacerā baḍerā parivār cha bal
dādriśī kaum cha bal
parivār māṃ korī calī cha bal
tālī dvī hāthoṃ bajīṃ cha bal
bhal-burā kai nī batauṇ bhī cha bal
jācanā terī karīṃ cha bal
biṭṭho bhī bāndhyo cha bal

TEXT 5

1. parameśvar pitrakālī devatāo
2. tumārī gaḍhī, tumārī maḍhī
3. tumārī caukī tumārā paiharā

4. nāgalok meṃ, thātlok meṃ
5. jim kī jāl kāl kī phāṃs
6. bandhan mukt karalo
7. sarvapratham tumāro nām go dhūp bharalo
8. tum apaṇī gaḍhī-maḍhī māṃ achap na hvayā
9. māṃ sārik pauṇā nī ca
10. pitra sārik koī kārya nī ca bhūt rājā
11. ye jagarant hvai jā bhūt mayā māt lok māṃ
12. paile nām dhūpe bharaṇ bhūt tumāro nām ko
13. terī rāṭhalī - guṭhalī darasan kī pyāsī
14. achap na hvayā bhūt gaḍhī - maḍhī māṃ jā!
15. satū ko sarāp paḍyā tyārā jim dvāre māṃ ja
16. ekāko ekuntā raigo bhūt dhaniyā sī ṭhyūṃsā
17. satū ko sarāp paḍyā tyārā jim dvāre māṃ ja
18. jai pāpī jīmālā hāro tero vo bolaṇo pauṇā
19. jai pāpī jīmālā rūṭhāī bhūt tyūṇī piṃgalī mānavā
20. dayā ko bhaṇḍārā holo dayā āī ghar
21. bhūtkāyā choṛo tum āī bhūt devakāyā āyā
22. nar binā nagar sūn
23. pañc binā pīpal sūn
24. aur kurm binā raige bhūt gaḍhī-maḍhī sūn
25. sadā nī raṇ bhūt yo dinai māsā
26. ritu—mās bauṛī auṇ bhūt, manu bauṛī nī auṇū
27. tum bhūtkāyā choṛī tum devakāyā āyā
28. kūmkūm ko satuṛī ko bhūt tumāro nām go vah dhūpe bharyālo
29. belāṃ amar huṇi bhūt, sākh amar nī raiṇī
30. ritu mā de ritu terī ku ritu pyārī
31. ritu mā de ritu bhūt basant go ritu
32. bārā bīsī phūl phūlyāṃ ghughutī ghurainī
33. jagarant hvai jā bhūte tū dhūrī kā dhūramā
34. bhūt tū gāy kā goṭhaṃgāṇā
35. bhūt tū bhaiṃsyoṃ kā kharag
36. dūdho kā pukhār
37. jai pāpī jīmālā rūṭhāyo terā jab gholā kā kaphuā
38. jai pāpī jīmālā bechāro terā bhāīyoṃ kā joṛā
39. nāgalok thātalok māṃ bhūt maiṃ jāl kāṭūlo
40. bhūt bandhanoṃ se tehūṇī bhūt maiṃ mugat karūlā
41. pahoṛe parāje lagī gaulī mā bāḍolī
42. aikā jo nī lyūṇā bhūt man ko aukhār
43. aikā jo nī lyūṇā bhūt cit ko cañcal
44. bhūt kāyā chvoṛike ab tum jab devayona dharoṃ
45. aunāvāl māso māṃ tyūṇī nyūtī bulyaulā
46. gharyālī lagūlā bhūtā tyūṇī vo dej dyolā
47. muṇḍā ke ṭālakhī dyolā bhūt tyūṇī
48. dyolā bhūt tyūṇa añg kī āñgaṛī

TEXT 6

1. pūrab ko din paścim bauḍaigī
2. ḍāṇḍī ḍūbī ghām gāḍī pauṛī chāyā
3. va chāyā pahuñcīgai ūñcā himāñcal
4. himāñcal kī chāyā pahuñcī mānasarovar
5. sāñjh hvaige sañjhoyā gojalī bagat
6. ab hvaige devo sandhyā go bagat
7. ab hvaige devo pūjā go bagat
8. ab hvaige devo divā deṃ dī bagat
9. bhūt nauṃ gī jot jalege
10. va jot jalegī kul go devatā
11. va jot jalegī bhūmī go bhūmyālā
12. morī gā naraiṇ va jot jalegī
13. kholī gā gaṇes va jot jalegī
14. va jot jalegī hari haridvāra
15. va jot jalege pañc pariyāg
16. va jot jalege sambhū gā kailās
17. va jot jalege nīlakaṇṭh nepāl
18. nau liñg kedār va jot jalege
19. gaurī kuṇḍ māṃ va jot jalege
20. kālīmaṭh māṃ va jot jalege
21. va jot jalege selā jośīmaṭh
22. badrī gā āśram va jot jalege
23. pañcanām devatoṃ kī va jot jalege
24. haridwār māṃ randā hari bhagawān
25. pariyāg mām randā pañcanām devata
26. kailās māṃ randā bhole śambhūnāth
27. nīlakaṇṭh māṃ randā gurūjī gorakh
28. gaurīkuṇḍ māṃ randā devī pārvatī
29. kālīmaṭh māṃ randā ye mātā kāliṅkā
30. joṣīmaṭh māṃ randā jośī narasiṃha
31. pañcanāma devatā kī va sabhā baiṭhīge
32. indrāsaṇ chvaṛike indrājī pahuñcīgā
33. brahmalok chvaṛike brahmājī pahuñcīgā
34. kailāse chvaṛike āye bhole śambhūnāth
35. jaintī kā pāṇḍav sabhā māṃ baiṭhīgā
36. kuntī putra bhīm sabhā māṃ baiṭhīgā
37. bolo bhīm sen kyā bainū bolandā?
38. "biśnū bhagawān ko putra paidā honā"
39. biśnū bhagawān ko lajjit banīgai
40. bhole sambhū nāth kyā bainū bolandā?
41. "tū ho jā gaurā maitūṛā gā des"
42. pahuñcīgai gaurā risāsau māṃ ga
43. risāsau māṃ ga pahuñcīgai bālū gā bagaḍ

44. bālū gā bagaḍ māṃ bhūt paidā hvaige
45. vāpas pahuñcīgai śiv gā kailās
46. pūchaṇ baiṭhīgai bhole śambhūnāth
47. kakh chvaṛī gaurā tū na garv ko bālak?
48. bālak chuṭīgai svāmī bālū gā bagaḍ
49. hāth dhāre sambhū payyāṃ pātī churī
50. pahuñcī gai sambhū bālū gā bagaḍ
51. bhūt nauṃ gī tūn do phāṛo karyailī
52. ek phāṛo ḍhalyāle svargaloka māṃ ga
53. ek phāṛo chvaṛyāle mṛtalok māṃ ga
54. mṛtyulok māṃ ga adhogati raṇ
55. gau māṭhī sārī māṃ ga dūbaṛo sarīgai
56. tai māṃ devo bhūt dos hvan
57. gau mūṛi sārī māṃ būbalo phūlan
58. tai māṃ devo bhūt dos hvan
59. dahī dūdh māṃ bhūt dos hvan
60. mrtulok māṃ ga adhogati raṇ
61. adhogati bhūto bhūt dos hvan
62. mrtulok māṃ ga bhūt dos hvan
63. kvaī pūjā nī paund mrtulok māṃ ga
64. kvaī panth nī paund mrtulok māṃ ga
65. mrtulok bhūt adhogati aiga
66. adhogati raṇ bhūt dos hvan
67. nī lyaṇ bhūt kāla go krodh
68. jai gā janam hvandā taigā maraṇ hvan
69. jug nī amar śākhā nī amar
70. adhogati raṇ bhūt dos hvan
71. bālo binaik adhogati marai
72. so bhī devo bhūt dos hvan
73. rājā dasarath putra sau kā maryai
74. so bhī merā devo bhūt dos hvayā
75. jaintī kā pāṇḍav adhogati marai
76. so bhī merā devo bhūt dos hvayā
77. kvaī pūjī nī paundā, kvaī panth nī paundā
78. mrtulok māṃ ga adhogati raṇ
79. nī lyaṇ bhūt kāla go krodh
80. jam kāl peṭe bāca nī bolānā
81. jam kāl peṭe āṃkh nī kholanā
82. jam kāl peṭe khilakārī māraṇ
83. koī kāṭī delo yo jam kī jhāl!
84. tū na chuṛāy jyūṃrā dagaḍiyoṃ ko dagaḍyo!
85. tū na chuṛāy jyūṃrā bhai - bandhoṃ dagaḍo!
86. tū na chuṛāy jyūṃrā godī gā bālak!
87. nyūtike bulyālo pūjike paṭhyālo

88. navami gā nauratā dasamī kī pūjā
89. ālo bhādo asoj delo ritū kī dhuiṃyāl
90. dubuddhi haṭhāī subuddhī dyaṇī
91. dopāī caupāī māṃ suphal de jāyāṃ
92. nara loka chvaṛike mrtuloka jānā
93. mrtu loka chvaṛike svargaloka jānā
94. svarga loka chvaṛike pitraloka jānā
95. pitraloka chvaṛike brahmaloka jānā
96. brahmaloka chvaṛike śivaloka jānā
97. śivaloka chvaṛike baikuṇṭh jānā
98. ab jālā bhūt badarī kā āsram
99. badarī kā āsram taptakuṇḍ māṃ ralā
100. badarī kā āsram māṃ nārad kuṇḍ māṃ ralā
101. badarī kā āsram surajai kuṇḍ māṃ ralā
102. badarī kā āsram dūdh kuṇḍ māṃ ralā
103. ab jālā bhūto vasudhārā māṃ ga
104. ab jālā bhūto satopanth mānasarovar

iti bhūt pūjā

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Notes

CHAPTER 1

1. The *timaru* is a small tree, *Zanthoxylum armatum*, also known as *tejmal*.

2. In the vernacular languages of north India, the final "a" of Sanskrit is neither written nor pronounced, and therefore I leave it out when transliterating vernacular terms.

3. See chapter 2 for a discussion of the links between Bhairav and the Naths.

4. Ethnology includes both (British) social anthropology and (American) cultural anthropology, but not the other disciplines that are sometimes taught alongside cultural anthropology in the American tradition of "four-field anthropology": archaeology, linguistics, and physical or biological anthropology. Indeed, the term "anthropology" was invented in Victorian England to distinguish a new, racially oriented and "scientific" paradigm from an older, socially and linguistically oriented one. Ethnography means literally "writing about culture," and it is based on ethnological research, but the term is often used in the way that I have used it here, as shorthand for the method of long-term participant observation that is central to the discipline of ethnology.

5. Arguments to this effect can be found throughout the works of Derrida and Foucault. Edward Said (1978) has also been influential in this regard. An exemplary article in this vein is Spivak 1988. The arguments have been applied specifically to anthropology in Fox 1991.

6. Gadamer 1960. For an excellent secondary source on Gadamer's philosophy, see Warnke 1987.

7. It is difficult to decide which term to use for the lowest castes in Garhwal. "Untouchable" is offensive to many, and "untouchability" is in any

case illegal in India. "Scheduled Caste" is a cumbersome and rather vague term, though it is often used by people of this group. "Dalit" (literally, "oppressed person") is preferred by those who are politically active and aware, but the word is hardly known in the Central Himalayas. I have decided to use "Harijan," a term coined by Gandhi that means literally "child of god," because it is the most widely used and ideologically neutral term in the region.

8. Claims to this effect are discussed by Deliege (1999), Ilaiah (1996), and Moffatt (1979).

9. In this book, the word "guru" refers, not to a spiritual master, but rather to a "master of the spirits"—someone who can summon, control, and exorcize ghosts, demons, and local deities. For a lengthy discussion of gurus, see chapter 4.

10. Her life story is found in chapter 4.

11. Mathiyala was the natal home of the woman who made the curse, the surviving junior wife whom Makkhan Lal's father Mathura Lal had accused of "not looking after" her stepchildren properly. Local gods are believed to be particularly responsive to the curses of women born in the villages where their shrines are located (see chapter 3).

12. The phrase *uccyana karna* means "to call/summon" (the god). This simple ritual has the main characteristics of a vow. One takes Rs. 1.25 and some red or yellow powder (*pithaim*), circles it around the heads of family members and/or livestock to remove any evil influences, and offers it to the deity, with the vow that if the affliction is removed, one will perform a more elaborate and costly ritual in the future.

13. *Puja* is the general term for "worship" or "ritual." For details on the *kas puja*, which precedes many forms of worship of local *devta*s, see chapter 3.

14. The word *than* is pronounced to rhyme with the English word "gone."

15. The guru normally plays a *huraki*, a small hourglass-shaped drum with two goatskin heads, the tightening straps of which are attached to a harness that he wears around his back, so that when he plays the drum he can, by pulling on the straps, cause it to make an unusual sound, which is especially effective in invoking the spirits. He is accompanied by the *thakalyor*, who plays an inverted metal platter with two wooden drumsticks, and usually by a third man, the *bhamvar* or "bumblebee," who echoes the final lines of each verse of the song. During my subsequent fieldwork, I often performed this third role. Garhwali gurus are also called *jagariya*, that is, ritual experts who lead night-long sessions called *jagar* (related to the words "awake" and "waken"), in which everyone stays awake and/or a particular god is "awakened" by singing his songs and performing his rituals.

16. Torn workbaskets are often used in local rituals; see chapter 3.

17. Yama, the god of death and lord of the underworld.

18. Writing of his research on similar matters among the Azande, the great English ethnographer Edward Evans-Pritchard wrote that it was sometimes difficult to check his own "lapse into unreason" (Evans-Pritchard 1963: 99).

19. For a brilliant and nuanced study of the range of positions that have been taken in European (especially French) writing about "other" cultures, see Todorov 1993.

20. See especially Fox 1991 and the articles therein.

21. This section is based on my fieldwork diary from March 19, 1997.

CHAPTER 2

1. The ritual for establishing and/or renewing the power of such shrines is discussed at length in chapter 3.

2. See chapter 1, note 1.

3. For more on the story of Daksha's sacrifice, see Goswami 1982: 4.II.13–15, 4.III.3–4, 4.IV.6–8.21, 5.11–16; Mertens 1998; O'Flaherty 1973: 214, 236.

4. For more on Bhairava, see Chalier-Visuvalingam 2003; Erndl 1989; Stietencron 1969; Slusser 1982; Sontheimer 1989.

5. I have been told that "Kachiya" means "the brilliant/shining one."

6. *Lohar* (smiths) and *Das* (musicians) are both Harijan castes.

7. Throughout this book, underlining indicates the use of English words.

8. Östör (1980: 61) also mentions that in Bengal, roofs should not be built above the shrines of powerful goddesses.

9. Maminda is a corruption of "Muhammad."

10. The Bhairav of time/death *kāl*, one of the best-known forms of Bhairav. His most famous temple is in Varanasi (Benares), and he is often said to be the "policeman" (*kotwal*) of that city.

11. *Disa-dhyani* is the term for "outmarried daughter." In other words, Kachiya's area of influence spread because he went along with village girls when they got married and moved to their husbands' homes. See "How the Cult Spreads," in chapter 3.

12. Ideas of local gods as providers of justice are not uncommon in the region. One of the best examples is the Kumaoni god Golu (known in Garhwal as Goril; see Agrawal 1999). The god Pokkhu in the upper Tons valley is referred to by his followers as a "god of justice and injustice" (*nyay-anyay ka devata*). During the royal period, he was officially authorized by the king to settle local disputes. Even nowadays, people who consider themselves victims of exploitation go to him for justice (cf. chapter 7).

13. The *phavari* is a ritual implement associated with Kachiya-Bhairav. It is made of iron or tin, in the shape of palm with bent fingers (see figure 2.1). During rituals, it is heated until it is red-hot and then licked by a possessed person, in order to demonstrate the authenticity of the trance.

14. *Dharthap diya*, where one strikes the ground with one's fist and utters an oath.

15. The *linga* is the phallic sign of Shiva, the god with whom Bhairav is associated. The motif of a linga spontaneously appearing and a cow offering its milk to it is extremely common in India.

16. A *sadhu* is a Hindu ascetic, or holy man. A *sadhu*'s fire is called a *dhuni* and is of particular importance for the cult and rituals of Bhairav, as well as for the Gorakhnath tradition of *kanphata yogi*s with which it is associated (see "Firesong," p. xvii, and also below).

17. The "red *handi*" is also of central importance in the story of Umeda and Sumeda below.

18. "Twelve twenties": *barah bisi*. Counting in units of twenty is a traditional way of reckoning land and livestock throughout the Central Himalayas.

19. The demon king of Lanka and chief villain of the *Ramayana* epic.

20. The *bahiyal* are fierce beings closely associated with Kachiya-Bhairav. It is they who do all kinds of violent work associated with the *devta*. See chapter 7.

21. A ritual dramatization of India's great epic *Mahabharata*. See Sax 2002.

22. For more on the Nath tradition, see Vaudeville 1976; Lapoint 1978; Chalier-Visuvalingam 2003; Briggs 1973 [1938]; Banerjea n.d. For the "eighty-four siddhas," see R. Davidson 2005: 14; Dowman 1985; and Robinson 1996. For the relationship between Nath and Siddha traditions, see White 1996, chap. 4, esp. 80–85 and 107–109.

23. "Cruel-hearted music": *kuro dilo nad*, also called *krodhi nad* or "furious music."

24. Recorded April 1997 by Darpal Lal Mistari.

25. According to the Samkhya philosophy, everything consists of a mixture of three *guna*s, or "strands. The *guna* of *tamas* is associated with darkness, decay, and sloth or inertia.

26. For example, "I remove the nail of the black snake, I remove the mouse-bone nail, I remove the buffalo-bone nail, I remove the 16-year-old virgin nail"—see chapter 3.

27. A good example of this is found in chapter 7.

28. See Liechty (2003: 23) for a similar notion applied to class.

29. For a brilliant discussion of such caste-based hexis in a ritual context, see Osella and Osella 2000.

30. For a discussion of possession as historical consciousness in Africa, see Stoller 1989; for the "alternative" consciousness of subalterns, see Chatterjee 1989: 169–209; Haynes and Prakash 1992; Omvedt 1995.

CHAPTER 3

1. Casey 1996. The targets of his critique are Myers 1986 and Weiner 1976.

2. They are: Badrinath in Garhwal, with Vishnu as the presiding deity; Jagannath in Puri on the East coast of India, also with Vishnu as the presiding deity; Rameshvaram at the southern tip of India, with Shiva as the presiding deity; and Dwaraka in the far west, with Krishna as the presiding deity. See also Sax 2005.

3. In the north Indian plains, this gesture is sometimes called *nachavar* and is meant to absorb inauspiciousness or "negatives" before getting rid of them (Raheja 1988).

4. Astrologers in Banaras also perform soil divination. In general, the tendency there is to perform soil divination for poorer people, and astrology for wealthier ones (Caterina Guenzi, personal communication).

5. An afflicting spirit; see "Exorcising the Crafty Demons" below.

6. Generally in this part of Garhwal, oracles use the term *dhami* to refer to clients during consultations. I have translated this term as "wayfarer," that is, one who has come to the abode (*dham*) of the god. In nearby Western Nepal, however, the term *dhami* is used for the oracle rather than the client (Campbell 1978), in which case one could translate it as the (temporary) "abode" of the *devta*.

7. This theme is taken up at length in chapter 7.

8. Samin is regarded as one of the most dangerous local *devta*s. He sometimes appears like a column of fire at night, and when you see him in that form you will die within twenty-four hours, unless you seek the aid of a guru. Similarly if he looks directly

at you, you will die, and that is why when he "dances" in possession rituals, he is completely covered with a blanket, and dances in a crouching possession, with his face close to the ground. Samin was the *devta* who possessed Surendra from Gair Sain when he acted as an oracle by holding consultations.

9. Surendra used the phrase *bittha bandhan* or "tying the bundle [*bittha*]." My assistant Dabar Singh Rawat glossed the word *bittha* as *uccyana*. A *bittha* is a "bundle" that one fills with rice or other materials and offers to the god; while *uccyana* (possibly related to Hindi *uccaran*, "accent, way of speaking") means "calling upon" the god. Both are a kind of vow or formal ritual action, by which one promises to worship the god in the future if one's affliction is removed immediately.

10. See "Exorcizing the Crafty Demons" below for a description of Masan.

11. These and other spirit and demons are discussed at length below, in "Exorcizing the Crafty Demons."

12. The Garhwali word *than* rhymes with the American English "gone," and is related to the Hindi word s*than* or "place," as well as to the English words "stand" and "static."

13. See chapter 4, "Triumph in Ali," where a *devta* asks to be "let out" of his *than*.

14. See Michaels (2005) for a thorough discussion of the *samkalpa* ritual.

15. A *ser* is traditional measuring container made of copper or brass. One ser is about 500 grams or half a kilo. Four *ser* make a *patha* and eight *patha* make a *dalona* or *kul*. 16 *patha* make a *don* and 20 *don* make a *khar*.

16. The seven grains are amaranthus, soybean, Himalayan spruce, mustard, black gram, wheat, and lentils (thanks to Data Ram Purohit for this information).

17. See "Exorcising the Crafty Demons" below for more on Masan.

18. The botanical name of *selu* is *grewia optiva*; it is also called the *bhimal* tree. (I thank Girija Pande for this information.)

19. *Gotra* is a fictive descent category, indicating descent from one or another of the mythical "seven Rishis." During the *samkalpa* ritual one must name one's *gotra*.

20. Compare pp. 89 below, where I argue that the *chhal* are returned to their proper places when the sacrificed goat is consumed by locally resident males.

21. This is the so-called soil of Malari (*malari ki mathi*) that plays a role in many local rituals.

22. Like the "soil of Malari," the "barley from Jawari" (*jauvari ka jau*) and "sesame seeds from Tilwari" (*tilwari ka til*) are proverbial.

23. Sacchu later told me this was a mistake, and that Soniya should not have covered the *handi*, since the blood was meant to flow into it.

24. According to Fruzetti, the *bhojana* rite in Bengal, in which boiled rice is eaten, illustrates the use of food "to effect a bodily change in the husband and wife, 'interiorizing' their same body relationship by causing their hearts to be exchanged" (1982: 49). Fruzetti argues that women never completely become part of husband's line; that they are in an "in-between, temporary position … within this system of lines and castes" (28).

25. Elsewhere (Sax 1990 and 1991), I argue that the extreme importance of the *dhyani* in Garhwal, including her enduring connection to her natal place and its *devtas*, is connected with the traditional custom of brideprice, which had nearly vanished by the end of the twentieth century.

26. I have heard of a similar cult in the far west of Garhwal, in Rawain on the border of Himachal Pradesh. There, a god called Bunno spreads through his *dhyanis*. But the local "divine king," Raja Karna (Sax 2000, 2002), refuses to let such gods into his territory.

27. A shrine was established in Dobari after Bhairav destroyed all the livestock of the Rajputs living there. See the story of Umeda and Sumeda in chapter 2.

28. The term *disha* means "daughter," and is more or less equivalent to *dhyani*.

29. *Daboch liya*; literally "pressed her" during the night; cf. Krauskopff 1999. Victims report feeling pressure on their chests and being unable to breathe.

30. He used the respectful term *sasur-ji*, as he would have done for all of Chandri's father's brothers.

31. This is a proverb: *Mait kamaya sar par hath, sauryas kamaya kele ka pat*, "If you earn in your natal home [*mait*] it's wasted [literally, "you strike your forehead"; i.e., it was a waste of time], but if you earn in your marital home [*sauryas*], you'll have lots to eat [literally " a big banana leaf," i.e. a big plate]."

32. *Dev kasam*; i.e., they had gone to a temple or shrine and taken a vow, symbolically marrying each other.

33. I have not, however, seen *chhal puja* performed for married men, nor for elderly people. Polit (2006) argues that this has to do with the nature of their bodies: "raw," immature and fluid (*kachcha*) for young unmarried persons and "cooked," mature and dry (*pakka*) for older married persons.

34. In fact, the term *masan* seems to denote ghosts and afflicting beings in general, in Nepal (Krauskopff 1999) as well as in Garhwal (Polit 2006).

35. *Jhar* means "to sweep" and *phuk* means "to destroy" or "blow apart."

36. *Chan-ban* means literally "those whose eyes are weapons."

CHAPTER 4

1. See, for example, Dirks, Eley and Ortner 1994; Giddens 1979; Greenhouse 1996; Ortner 1984; Strathern 1988.

2. See, for example, D. Davidson 1980.

3. Bratman 1992; Gilbert 1989; Searle 1995; Tuomela 1995; Tuomela and Miller 1988.

4. Cole and Engeström 1993; Engström and Middleton 1996; Huhns and Gasser 1989; Hutchins 1995; Middleton and Edwards 1990; Resnick, Levine and Teasley 1991.

5. See Sontheimer 1965 for a discussion of Hindu gods as legal persons.

6. For other examples from outside India, see Boddy 1989; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Gell 1998; Keane 1997a, 1997b and 2003; Miyazaki 2000; Ortner 1997.

7. A *ghar javaim* is a husband (*javaim*) who lives in the house (*ghar*) of his wife, thus reversing the normal rules of residence. Typically, a man without sons arranges a *ghar javaim* for his daughter, so that his property will remain in the family. The *ghar javaim* himself has no claim to the property, but his children do. For further details see chapter 6, note 17.

8. The word *kabar* means literally "rubbish." Here, it refers to "poison" fed to an enemy, or to a packet of magical substances that is hidden in a person's house by a sorcerer in order to harm him.

9. Note that the god's diagnosis begins with a particular place, just as in the oracular consultations discussed in chapter 3.

10. These are the signs of Bhairava; see "The Iconographic Appearance of Bhairav," in chapter 2.

11. Kashi Lal is the founder of the famous Bhairav temple at Kothyar, near Gair Sain.

12. According to Dabar Singh, this goddess wanders as far as Badhan and Dasam Dvar on her periodic ritual processions. Note that it is considered inappropriate for women to wander without an escort.

13. The oracle Gaurja Mai continued describing the movements of the goddess Gaurja Mai: "She was in Chandpur Garhi first, then she went to Chopta via a *dhyani* from my family. From there she went to Top village—the fishermen carried her across the river. My family didn't allow her to wander on a procession, it causes too much trouble. So she went to Chopta, where the people do take her on a procession in the Pindar valley, up to Narayan Bagar. Elsewhere they make a single ritual circle, here in the Fort we make three: one for Kalpir, one for Kalinka, and one in Dhara for Bhagawati."

14. This is a bit confusing. I have translated *kal rup sangar* as "death-dealing form"; but my assistant, Dabar Singh, insisted that Gurja Mai said "*shringar*," which would mean something like "ornamentation as the form of death," or even, to stretch matters a bit, her (erotic) beautification as death-dealer. The point seems to be that the powerful deities sit on top of the mountain, while the lesser ones (including the "popular" Durga) are at a lower elevation.

15. I have translated *agvani bir*, an epithet for the *devta* Latu, who accompanies Nanda Devi, as "pathfinding hero," and *vetal bir* as "Goblin Champion."

16. A Himalayan griffin, a very auspicious bird.

17. *Putraphal*, literally the "fruit of a son," a piece of fruit that is blessed, then given to childless women to help them conceive. The woman should not eat that fruit again until a son is born.

18. The *pati* is a long pole that draped with fruits, flowers, or other items, then carried around the village during Nanda Devi's annual festival.

19. In the original:

sallam teri mata havai ko sallam
sallam teri pita panjabi ko sallam
sallam teri budi bamani ko sallam
sallam teri dilli takht ko sallam
sallam teri pan ka beda ko sallam
teri laung ki badi ko sallam
sallam teri pita panjabi ko sallam

20. It is considered shameful to marry in one's own village, or even in a neighboring village, because age-mates who know each other are classificatory siblings. This results in a local custom that ethnologists refer to as "preferential village endogamy." In any case, Gaurja Mai's point is that by marrying her so close to home, her relatives were courting their own embarrassment, and this only increased when she became an oracle.

21. The first day I visited her, she collected over Rs. 200.

22. The term "Bhotiya" is, and has been for a long time, widely used in Uttarkhand to designate those ethnic groups who were responsible for the cross-border trade with Tibet, until the border was closed following the Indo-Tibetan war of 1962. They themselves reject this term, however, preferring to use the ethnonyms associated with the five "Mahals" into which they are divided: Jad, Tolccha, Marccha, Johari, and Darma.

23. *Akhada bandh / thap hua*. I have translated the term *akhada* as "arena." It is normally used for the place/event where many people are possessed by the god and dance. Literally, it refers to certain monastic orders of Hindu monks who were active as armed soldiers, mercenaries, and so forth, during the early middle ages, as well as to the wrestling clubs so popular with young north Indian men (Alter 1992).

24. Later, Sacchu told me that this meant the *kera*, magic circle, was closed, and the god wanted to open it. There are two types of puja, he explained: one when the god is established in his shrine and a magic circle is drawn to keep him in; and later when the god is summoned for some purpose and the circle is opened to let him out. The god was requesting this second type of puja.

25. See chapter 3, note 28.

26. I do not know the meaning of this term.

27. This mantra is clearly associated with the Nath order of Shaiva ascetics (see chapter 2). The language is esoteric and thus the accuracy of my translation rather doubtful. I am, however, forbidden to publish or share the original text.

28. "Guru Gorakh the King," a rather strange form of address.

29. The word *masani* is the female form of *masan*, the "lord of the cremation ground" (see "Exorcising the Crafty Demons," in chapter 3).

30. A *dakini* is a kind of malevolent female spirit.

31. The word *vajra* has strong Buddhist associations, and means "diamond, adamantine; lightning bolt." Tibetan tantric buddhism is called *Vajrayana*, the "lightning bolt vehicle."

32. The term *pinda* means "body" or "ball of rice" used in certain rituals to represent ancestral bodies. The meaning of this line is unclear.

33. Protectors (*pal*) of the field (*kshetra*), meaning the village gods.

34. See her biography earlier in this chapter.

35. As Darpal was telling me this story, the girl's mother's brother, who was one of the men who had gone to fetch Darpal, called out from the background, "Water every two minutes! Water every two minutes! Water every two minutes!"

36. Sacchu always uses the respectful form *pita-ji* in this document.

37. In other words it was the correct *parva*.

CHAPTER 5

1. Daniel 1984; Marriott 1990; Inden 1990; Inden and Nicholas 1977; Raheja 1988.

2. I have placed much of the explanatory material in the notes so as not to spoil the flow of the translation. I did not translate every word of this consultation, primarily

because much of the speech was unclear or incoherent, but the oracle's introductory, mantra-like speech is reproduced in the appendix as Text 4.

3. The term *asur* is used for these animals, possibly because of the strong association of male buffaloes with the demon Mahishasura (see Sax 1991, chap. 4).

4. I have written these four lines as statements, but they could also be questions, because at this point the oracle is trying (unsuccessfully) to elicit a response from the client.

5. See chapter 3, note 9.

6. A number of different terms are used by clients to address oracles, but the most common one is "Parameshvari" or "Great Goddess," even when the oracle is possessed by a male god. Here of course, both oracle and possessing goddess were female, so the term was particularly apt.

7. "Kashi Lal" refers to the legendary founder of Bhairav's temple in Kothyar Bar, near Gair Sain.

8. The *chaja*, a stone ledge between first and second floors.

9. Literally, "child," another term sometimes used by oracles to address clients.

10. Kaldu Bagad is Bhairav's shrine at Kaleshvar, and Dobari Bar is the place where Bhairav destroyed the livestock of the Rajputs who refused to give him land, in the story of Umeda and Sumeda (see chapter 2). Chandi is a fierce goddess.

11. These are categories of curses; see chapter 7.

12. Literally, "There was *panchuta* [pollution of water]"; i.e., the families were not accepting food or water from one another.

13. The oracle uses the phrase *kas padhna*, which Surendra later glossed as *tap jana*, "to be silent."

14. In other words, the senior male of the family has died and become a ghost, and is obstructing the puja of the living.

15. *Chauki* refers to the stone "square" in front of a traditional Garhwali house. Here it seems to be synonymous with *than*.

16. Later in Heidelberg, Jagdish told me that the client must have said this because the dead man's daughter was also present, and no doubt angry that her male cousins were eating the land, so that her *hamkar* was also involved. Why then did he refer to the *hamkar* as his *sister's* (rather than his brother's) daughter?

17. Kakar 1982; Nabokov 2000; Pakaslahti 1998 and 2005; Skultans 1987.

18. Blos 1967; Doctors 2000; Franz and White 1985; Mahler 1968.

19. See postscript for a more extensive discussion.

CHAPTER 6

1. Hertz 1960. As Bloch and Parry (1982) put it in the introduction to their book *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, social order is not the cause of mourning rituals but rather their product. For more on ghosts in South Asia, see Freed and Freed 1990; Kakar 1983; Knipe 1990 [1989] and 1993; Lawrence 2000; Perera 2000; Stanley 1988; and Vitebsky 1993.

2. For more on processes of changing ghosts into ancestors in Hindu South Asia, see Nabokov 2000 and Uchiyamada 2000.

3. See “Establishing a Shrine,” in chapter 3 for a description of shifting a shrine.

4. Literally “tightness has fallen” (*kas pad gaya hai*).

5. Dowry Bhairav (*daijyara bhairav*): a form of Bhairav that comes with a new bride as her metaphorical “dowry”; see chapter 3, “How the Cult Spreads.”

6. Both *kumkum* and *saturi* are local forms of incense.

7. This is a standard line in many Garhwali songs; similar to the English phrase “my ears are burning.”

8. Such “lighting of the lamps” is typical of traditional devotional songs in Uttarakhand.

9. This story is reminiscent of other Hindu myths about Vishnu’s pregnancy, and the name “Vinayaka” suggests Shiva’s Ganesh, who was also an unusual child; Jagdish himself, however, did not link the words of the song to any further myths.

10. Traditional houses in Chamoli District have a figure of the elephant-headed god Ganesh carved over the door, while the god Narayan is associated with the window.

11. The *panch prayag*, or “five river confluences,” are famous sacred places in Garhwal.

12. One of Shiva’s names.

13. Here Jagdish comments, “Shiva transferred the baby to Parvati’s belly.”

14. This line is ambiguous: *chvadna* could mean “abort,” “leave behind,” or “give birth to.”

15. When he wrote this song down for me in Heidelberg, Jagdish wrote this line, *iti bhut puja*, at the end of the page.

16. In Banaras, after a corpse is cremated the chief mourner drops an earthen pot on the pyre. It shatters, and he walks away with his back to the fire. As the saying goes, “a shattered pot, a broken relation [*gagri phuae, nata tute*]”; (Parry 1994: 177).

17. A *ghar javaim*, literally a “house husband,” is a man (typically of limited means) who marries the daughter of a sonless man and lives in his home. He has no right to inherit the land and other property, but his male offspring do. In this way, the property stays within the family even though the wife had no brothers to inherit it. It is rather shameful to be a *ghar javaim*, and this is pithily expressed in a local adage:

dur javaim devata saman	A far son-in-law is like a god,
nazdik javaim adha	a near one, only half.
ghar javaim gadha saman	Load what you like on the house son-in-law,
jitane cahe lada	for he is but an ass.

18. Jagdish said that the same was true of the *ashthabali* or “sacrifice of eight animals,” widely thought of in Chamoli as the most powerful and elaborate of sacrifices, in which a goat, pig, cock, crab, crawdad, buffalo, fish, and porcupine are all sacrificed. These animals are neither *ashuddh* nor *ashubh*—they are simply the appropriate foods for the relevant deities.

19. Note that in the ghost puja described earlier, Darpal had also expected the surviving husband to be possessed first, although he wasn’t. Evidently gurus are not infallible!

20. The *ulta karya*, or “crooked ritual”—see chapter 5, “The Man Whose Land Was Eaten.”

21. In this region, small stones are kept in particular, remote locations as memorials of deceased ancestors. These places are called *pitragadhi* (home of the ancestors) or *lingavas* (residence of the ancestral "signs" [*linga*]).

22. It is highly improper for a woman to touch or even speak to her husband's elder brother.

23. The same point has been made by numerous authors, including Talal Asad (1993, chapter 2) with regard to ritual.

CHAPTER 7

1. See Nabokov 2000, Obeyesekare 1975, and Gombrich and Obeyesekare 1988: 72–74, for numerous parallels to Garhwali magical practices.

2. Evidently they had contracted a brideprice wedding; see Sax 1991, chapter 2.

3. Surendra later told me that, in his view, Lakshmi was murdered by her husband. She had been happily talking with her mother and heard a knock on the door. Thinking that her husband had come home, she jumped up to cook his meal. Half an hour later, the husband came to the mother and said, "Look—she's killed herself." But he didn't weep, and he immediately had a post-mortem done by one of his relatives. Later he never discussed the possibility of marrying his wife's sister or some other female relative in order to continue his relationship with their family, which he would have done had their relationship been a good one.

4. On *ghar jawain* see chapter 6, note 18.

5. On *kapat* (= kabar), see chapter 4, note 8.

6. The *maiti devta* is the god from her natal place (*mait*). The *jethani* is threatening the client with the power of her (the *jethani's*) god.

7. Here she addresses her rival as Thakurani, "wife of the Lord" (*thakur*), since the rival is married to her husband's elder brother and therefore of higher rank.

8. The *jethani* explicitly threatens the client with a divine curse, so she concludes that the *jethani* is responsible for her son's affliction.

9. X has already appeared in this book. Y is widely regarded as the most powerful local oracle of Kachiya. The client is asserting that these two priests, both relatives of hers, intentionally made the *dikara* or image of Kachiya incorrectly, so that either her puja would be unsuccessful or that it would rebound against her.

10. This detail is important for the client's interpretation. Below, she will claim that the guru Jassu performed puja on her behalf for the wrong Kachiya: the Kachiya of Dol rather than of Kaldu.

11. In other words, Kachiya accompanied the client's rival to her husband's home. This is a common expression: "to go as *dahej*" (*daij ma jana*)—see chapter 3, "How the Cult Spreads," for the idea that Kachiya often accompanies Dalit women to their marital homes.

12. For "closest kin" she used the word *svaura*, that is, the relatives for whom birth and death taboos are observed.

13. The "sacrifice of eight (animals)" or *asthabali*, is the most elaborate local sacrifice, involving considerable expenditure of resources.

14. That is, it was a vegetarian ritual that did not involve animal sacrifice.

15. The *jagar* is a kind of séance in which people stay up at night, singing the songs of the god in order to “awaken” him or her.

16. Perhaps the client was referring to the fact that he had initiated the ritual aggression—or perhaps to the fact that he had separated from his family and no longer lived with them.

17. To “cut off [somone’s] nose” is a typical Hindi expression meaning “to shame someone.”

18. Selling *chhuri* (bangles) is a traditional Muslim occupation, and *halal*, of course, refers to Muslim food regulations.

POSTSCRIPT

1. A good summary of the issues in relation to both consumption and the rise of Asian middle classes can be found in Liechty 2003, chap. 1. For a literary and social theoretical view, see Berman 1982.

2. “Es geht hier nicht um ein Ritual, sondern um die tiefe Überzeugung,” http://www.tagesschau.de/aktuell/meldungen/0,1185,OID4983142_TYP1_NAV_REF1,00.html.

3. In his performative approach, Tambiah defines rituals as “ patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition)” (1979: 119).

4. Many observations in this and the following paragraph are inspired by Kertzer 1988.

5. I have argued this elsewhere as well. See Sax 1991, chap, 5; 2002, introduction; and forthcoming.

6. This has often been claimed, especially by critical medical anthropologists. See, for example, Baer, Singer, and Susser 1997, Foucault 1975, Martin 1987, Singer and Baer 1995, and Singer, Baer, and Lazarus 1990.

7. One is reminded of the Victorian anthropology of E. B. Tylor, whose search for customs that no longer served any useful function—what he called “survivals”—was motivated by the desire to root them out.

8. Wenn die Krankheit weiter nichts, als Leben unter veränderten Bedingungen ist, so bedeutet Heilen im Allgemeinen das Herstellen der gewöhnlichen, normalen Bedingungen des Lebens oder das Herstellen der gewöhnlichen, normalen Vorgänge desselben. Die Vernichtung der ontologischen Auffassung der Krankheiten ist auch eine Vernichtung der ontologischen Therapie, der Schule der Spezifiker. Der Gegenstand der Therapie sind nicht Krankheiten, sondern Bedingungen; überall handelt es sich nur um das Wechseln der Lebensbedingungen (Virchow 1856: 30).

9. But see Raguram et al. 2002.

10. For a number of reasons, alternative healing practices seem to be gaining in popularity in the contemporary West, especially since popular dissatisfaction with “cold” and technocratic forms of biomedical treatment has become almost a cliché since the 1970s (Baer, Singer, and Susser 1997; Illich 1977).

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